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TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

Pleasant Jim

by MAX BRAND

the DARK HORSE

by WILL JAMES

PRAIRIE GUNS

by E.E. HALLERAN

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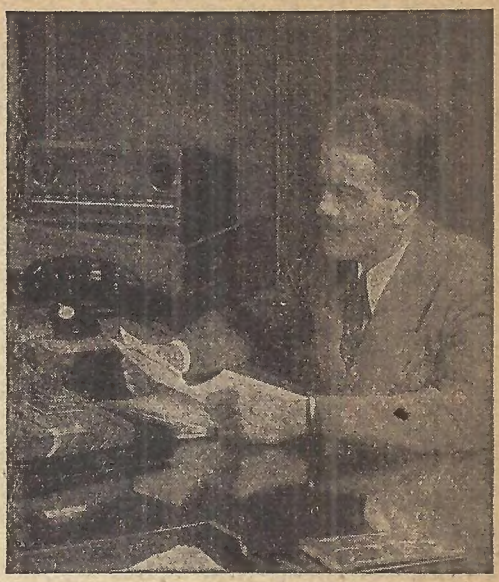

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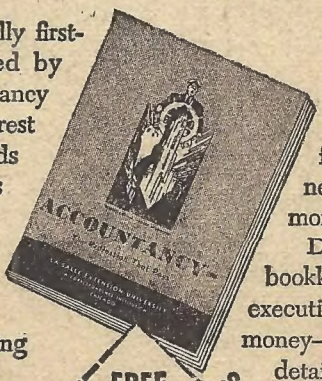

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PLEASANT JIM

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MAX BRAND 13

THE DARK HORSE

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WILL JAMES 64

PRAIRIE GUNS

When Terry Donovan arrives in Abilene with a Texas trail drive, he is plunged into the midst of a grim cattleman-homesteader feud—and then joins the embattled Oklahomans in their fight against warring Indians!

E. E. HALLERAN 102

THE TRAIL BOSS	A Department	6
THE WOOD IN SILVER (A Fact Feature)	Harry Van Demark	61
WILL JAMES, BUCKAROO	John Edward Dalton	94
THE RETURN OF NEVADA JORDAN (A Short Story)	Burl Tuttle	99
FROM THE ANNALS OF THE FRONTIER	Western Facts	144
HOLY COW! (A True Feature)	Allan K. Echols	145
WAYWARD (A Short Story)	L. Ernenwein	147

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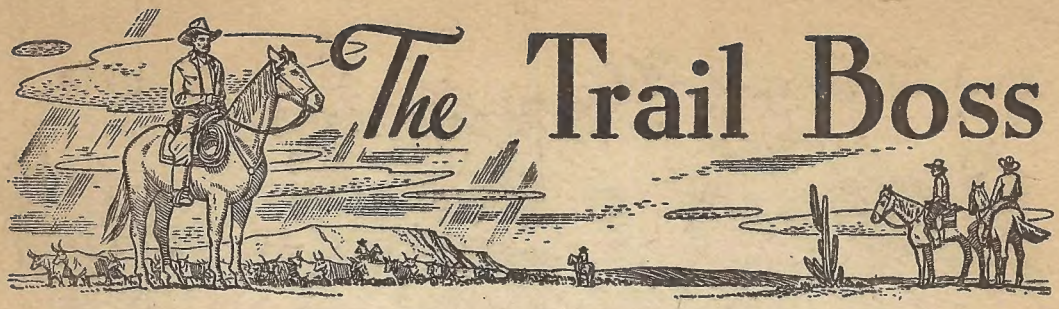

The Trail Boss

A FRIENDLY GET-TOGETHER FOR ALL HANDS!

HOWDY, Trail Hands! Glad to see you crowding around the figurative campfire once more for another chat with the Trail Boss.

One of the reasons that makes dramatic action stories of the West so true to life is the fact that drama often set the pace and pulse of pioneer living in the open range country. Old timers don't have to dream up exciting events of the past. All they have to do is sit back and remember what actually happened—as part of their thrilling everyday world.

Cattle stampedes were always dramatic episodes, fraught with danger to the running animals, and often full of genuine life or death peril to the cowboys attempting to halt or calm the frightened beasts.

The very fact that most stampedes occur on stormy nights when Nature is at its worst, the dark ground shaken by thunder and the black sky rent by streaks of lightning, always made them harder to control as well as doubly dangerous for the riders.

What Causes Stampedes?

Yet nobody knows exactly what causes a bedded-down bunch of beef critters to decide on a split second's notice to rise up in a group and light out for parts unknown.

Thunder and lightning will do it—sometimes. So will a sudden revolver shot, the crackling of a twig, or the barking of a coyote. All these have been listed by cattlemen as causes of stampedes among their herds.

On the other hand stampedes have been recorded time and again that started for no apparent reason other than the natural spookiness of the herd. Longhorns were particularly prone to this type of stampede. Half wild and hard to handle compared to modern and somewhat "tamer" whitefaces, oldtime longhorns were often nervous as deer at night, especially when put to rest on strange and new bed grounds each evening during long trail drives.

Not Many Bing Crosbys

Maybe some of those mossyhorns just didn't cotton to the night herder's nasal lullaby. Though the majority perhaps of early day cowboys sang when they rode night herd—to keep themselves awake and the cattle quiet—there were, if the truth must be told, few Bing Crosbys among them.

Whatever the cause, or no cause at all once one steer has jumped to his feet in snorting, wild-eyed terror the rest will be up in an incredibly short time. Panting and bellowing, they are ready to follow the first animal that makes a break from the bed ground. When that happens all hell comes loose at the hinges.

Stampeded cattle are as unreasoning in their flight as a pair of runaway horses. They know no danger, but from behind. And if they did those in front couldn't stop for the surging sea of maddened animals in the rear.

No danger will stop them, or swerve them from their path. If a precipice lies ahead and the terror-stricken animals are not turned or headed off by skilled and tremendously courageous riders, they will plunge over it to horrible destruction. A rocky gorge or deep-cut canyon may kill or seriously cripple half the cattle in a single stampede if it lies in the way of the onrushing beasts.

No Rest for Cowpokes

Even when a stampede is stopped there is no rest for the cowboys. Every effort has to be exerted to calm the animals down and prevent another break. Moreover a stampede is apt to make the cattle that aren't killed, crippled or scattered to the four winds nervous and hard to handle for many days.

As far as stampedes are concerned the

(*Continued on page* 8)

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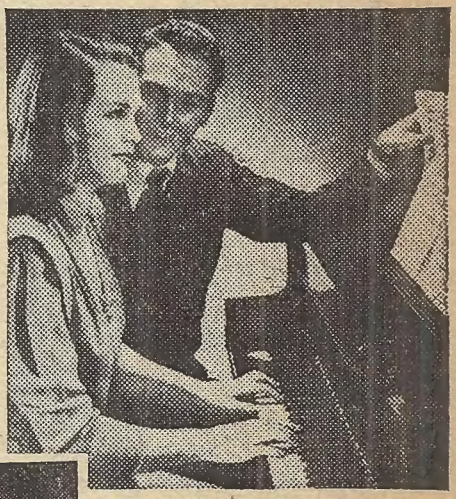

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THE TRAIL BOSS

(*Continued from page* 6)

"remembering-est" oldtimer I ever knew was a bow-legged, lantern-jawed Texas cowhand—Poker Face Partridge.

Poker Face was quite a story teller and once on the subject, stampedes fairly oozed out of his ears. And they were generally bigger, better and more fantastic ones than anybody else had ever seen or heard of.

His favorite was about the time "Railroad" Ike McQuin's past training managed to save his life in the worst stampede "this side of a Dodge City bar when the drinks were on the house."

It seems McQuin was an early day railroader braking freight trains on the Santa Fe when the iron horse first reached Dodge City to haul long carloads of bawling Texas longhorns back to the eastern market centers. McQuin got bitten by the cowboy virus. Nothing would suit him but he swap the iron horse for a Texas kak and a frisky bronc and go riding the range with the rest of the hell-for-leather cowhands.

Finally a short-handed outfit that had just finished a long drive to Dodge took him on to help nurse the saddle cavvy back to the Lone Star State.

Saddle on Backwards

Just to show how eastern-dude-ignorant of range matters that McQuin fellow was—Poker Face would say, solemn as a sky pilot preaching gospel—first time I seen him we was all saddling up and getting ready to head out of Dodge for Texas. I am watching Railroad and suddenly, leaving my own kak half cinched I go over to the new hand.

"Getting your saddle on backards, ain't you?" I says trying to be friendly.

Railroad gives me a look that would have froze water in Texas' summer sunshine.

"Don't be so smart," he says. "You don't even know which way I'm going."

"You could turn the animal around," I says.

"What!" snorts McQuin. "And not see which way I'm heading. I'm too good a railroader for that."

Finally he gets it through his skull that cow horses and steam engines work different. You don't back cow horses down the trail and you don't need no turntable to turn them around on neither. McQuin figured on back-

(*Continued on page* 10)

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Duraclean Co. 69-4 Pl. Deerfield, Ill.

THE TRAIL BOSS

(*Continued from page* 8)

ing that pony clear to Texas.

Next time I run into Ike him and me are in the same outfit pushing a herd of cattle up the Pecos along the old Goodnight-Loving trail to Fort Sumner. McQuin has caught on some, but not much. And he still has railroad notions.

The Old Red Lantern

The first evening he is on night herd he fishes an old red lantern out of his private gear in his soogans, lights it and ties it onto the tail of his pony.

"What's that for?" I asks him.

"Why," he says, "that's a rear end marker. I don't want no rear end collisions on this run."

"Take it off," I says, "before you spook your horse and all them sleeping longhorns with him. All you got to do is keep circling slow and easy around that bedded-down herd until your trick is up and a waddy with some sense comes on to relieve you."

I am relieving Railroad myself that night. It is a clear starlight night. Bright moon, no wind and not a cloud in the sky. Though we are camped in some rough canyon-cut country not a soul is expecting any trouble—least of all a stampede.

Along about rousing time when me and a fellow named Jim Hall are due to relieve Railroad and his night shift partner there is a sudden loud blast that snaps all hands to a sitting position in their blankets. It ain't sharp enough for a rifle crack, and it is too loud for a forty-five.

Four Kinds of Havoc

Next instant four kinds of havoc breaks loose—all bad. Bawling, and crazy-scared, the herd is up and leaving for another clime. It looks like they have picked Montana and they will make it before morning.

In two shakes all hands and the cook are in the saddle trying to stop them steers. In the moonlight we can see the stampede pointing for the opening leading down a steep, rock-walled, boulder strewn gulch. They are going to crowd into that narrow hole like coal oil pouring down a funnel. Up front, pounding leather and riding just ahead of the first wave of the stampede, is Railroad.

Railroad can't turn back and what is going

(*Continued on page* 155)

HUNTING HAWK MISSES HIS KILL BUT THEN...
GET HIM, SATAN!
FALCONRY, AN ANCIENT SPORT, STILL SURVIVES AND BEN DAIL IS SHOWING HIS SISTER HOW IT'S DONE
HERE'S A NICE DOUBLE...A CROW AND A HAWK
DON'T SHOOT!
SATAN MISSED!
DICK BRENT! I THOUGHT YOU STAYED IN ENGLAND, FLYBOY!
GOT BACK LAST WEEK, BEN. CAME UP HERE FOR A REST
WE LIVE HERE
NO ARGUMENTS, DICK. YOU'RE COMING HOME WITH US. WE'LL GET YOUR BAGS AFTER DINNER
THROW IN A SHAVE AND SHOWER AND I'M SOLD
AND SO AFTER A DAY-LONG CROW HUNT WITH HAWK AND GUN...
TRY A THIN GILLETTE BLADE ON THAT STUBBLE
THIS BLADE'S GREAT STUFF! SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN
SO IF YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO'S LOOKING FOR A TURBO-JET EXPERT
WHY, BEN! UNCLE BOB HAS BEEN COMBING THE COUNTRY FOR MEN LIKE DICK
HE'S HANDSOME
MEN, WHEN IT COMES TO EXTRA SHAVING COMFORT, PLUS ECONOMY, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES. YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION, TOO, FOR THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE
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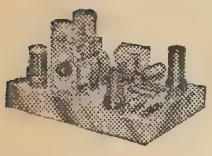

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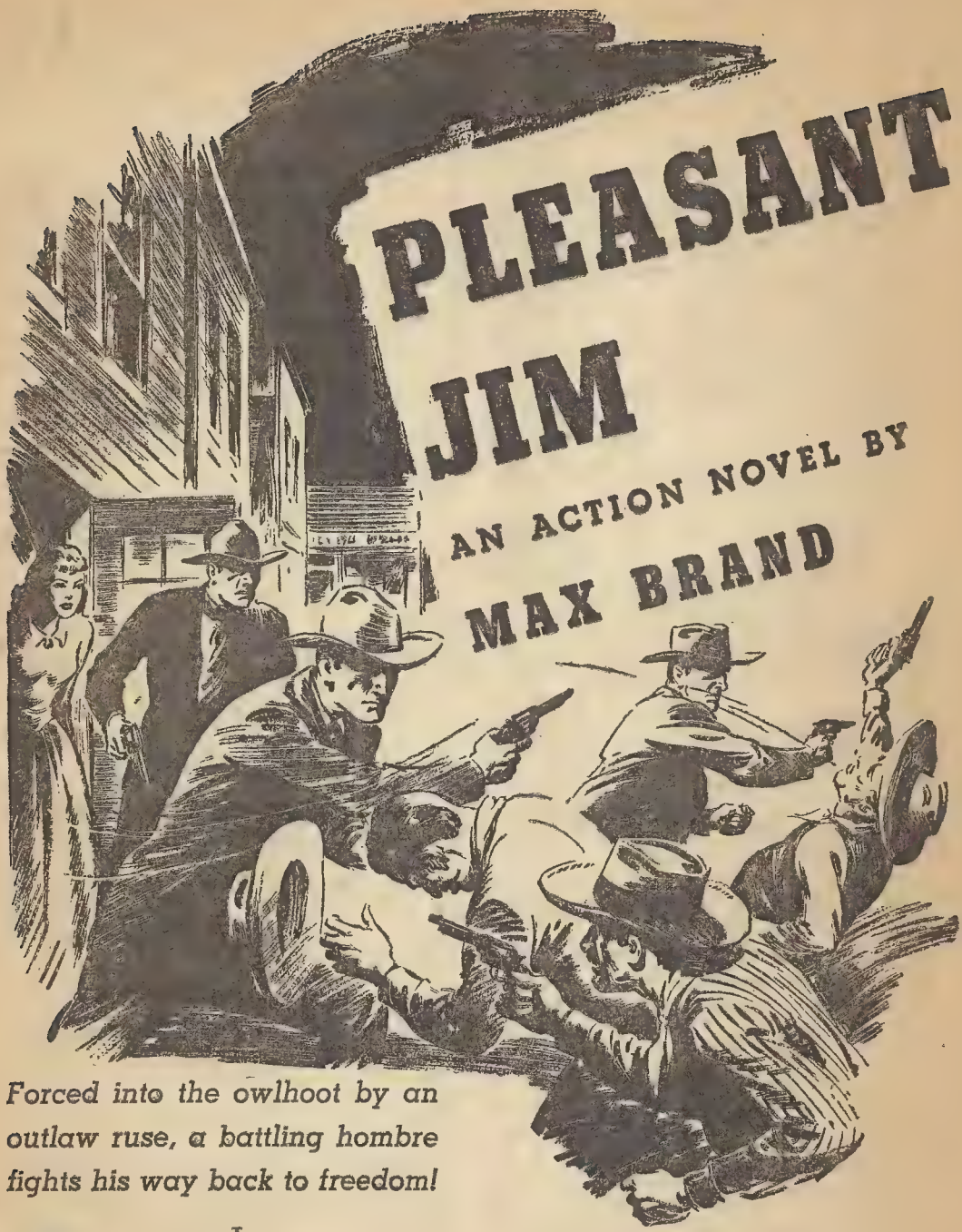


PLEASANT JIM

AN ACTION NOVEL BY

MAX BRAND

Forced into the owlhoot by an outlaw ruse, a battling hombre fights his way back to freedom!

I

ALL that Jim Pleasant had been, all that he had done, amounted to nothing. His life, for all purposes, began when he ran down Charlie Rizdal in the mountains behind King's River, on the elbow turn of a narrow trail with a two-thousand-foot outer edge. If there were any disadvantage, it hung upon Jim Pleasant or Pleasant Jim, as he was ironically nicknamed.

He had not tasted food for two days. Accordingly, he was no quicker than a

scared wolf. His bullet only pierced the shoulder of Rizdal, but since it arrived at its mark just a hundredth part of a second before Rizdal pulled his trigger, the latter fired into the ground.

Rizdal was, however, a man who had a reward of eight thousand dollars hanging over his head, and even when he was thrown off balance he had the presence of mind to observe that his horse was bulkier than Jim Pleasant's and that it was on the inside of trail. He clutched the flanks of his horse with the spurs, and the frantic gelding leaped straight into Pleasant's mustang.

But Pleasant had seen the meaning of that charge, and while the poor little mustang spun head over heels towards the canyon floor, his rider was clinging to Rizdal.

Mr. Rizdal picked from the top of his riding boot a long knife, while the frightened horse plunged madly along the winding curves. Pleasant saw the knife, but he was not startled into an act of folly. Rizdal deserved death, but dead he was worth only five thousand while, living, he was worth eight. Some people thought that if the bank robber were captured alive he might be induced to surrender some of his spoils for the sake of a lighter sentence. So instead of pulling the trigger a second time, Pleasant used the barrel of the Colt to tap the robber on the head.

When Rizdal's wits returned to him, he found his captor sitting cross-legged beside him on the trail.

"Well?" said Rizdal, sitting up. "You came out best, as usual."

"I've been wondering if it's worth while, Charlie," said Pleasant. "It's a long trip, and after you arrive at Fisher Falls, they'll hang you. Whachu think?"

Mr. Rizdal nodded. "Well," said he, "you could put a bullet through me and say it was done during the fight."

Mr. Pleasant remarked absently, "There's three grand more in you alive than dead. I think I'll take you in, Charlie. Now, lemme have a look at that shoulder."

They patched up the shoulder between them.

"If you want the cash," said Rizdal, "I could show you a quicker way. You turn me in and get that blood money and I hang. Then you have my brother on your neck, and Long Tom ain't a joke to play against. Now, what a cinch it would be, Jim, to just meet up with Tom and let him drop a chunk of banknotes into your pocket. Say you take fifteen thousand from Tom. Also, I don't hold no malice, particular. But Long Tom is different. Think it over."

But if Pleasant thought the matter over, he said no word, and later rode with his prisoner into Fisher Falls to the jail. . . .

A DRIVING tramontana came down from the white-headed upper range that morning, and Pleasant was glad to step out of the wind and inside the bank. The clerks smiled at him—they knew why he was there—and Lewis Fisher, the president, came in with the broadest of smiles, also.

"Three years ago, Jim," said he, in his private office, "there was fifteen thousand against you. Now there's barely twenty-five hundred. That's progress, my boy. Only twenty-five hundred between you and freedom!"

Fisher was not yet sixty, but he was the father of the town, had given it being and name, and he looked upon the place with a child's delight in a toy. He was a public-spirited man. He had built Fisher's theater; he had established Fisher's *Evening Democrat;* and he had allowed the town fathers to buy a central tract which was to be turned into a park, one day.

"I'm free enough, Mr. Fisher," Jim Pleasant answered.

"Never so long as you owe money," said the banker. "That's the penalty of speculation. Money makes strength; also, it makes slavery. So clear yourself of debt, my boy. I want to see you get on."

Pleasant merely tucked into his wallet the release which sliced away so large a part of his mortgage and stood up.

"I'll be going along," said he.

"Not even wait for a little celebration?" asked Fisher. "Not wait for an *Evening Democrat* reporter to get the true story of the capture?"

A group of admiring townsfolk had gathered around Pleasant Jim's horse—the one which he had taken from Rizdal on the trail—but he stepped through their midst, swung into saddle and sent the horse pelting down the street. By the time the last house was behind him, he had forgotten the glory of his adventure.

Eight miles separated him from his farm, and he rode the good gelding at a dizzy speed until he topped the last hill on the verge of his domain. It was no great tract, but all of it was good.

No water famine could destroy his stock and where could better pasturage be found? He did not waste his energies

JIM PLEASANT

on the maintenance of a clumsy herd of cows, neither did he run a ragged band of mustangs; instead, his fortune was invested in saddle stock, tough and hardy, with a bronco strain. A cowboy knew where to come when he wanted between his knees something that could throw dust in the eyes of nearly every other horse on the range.

When Pleasant Jim came through the southern gate, a gray two-year-old came dancing to inspect him, then in alarm shot away like a bolt. There would be a mount for someone—bone and substance enough to please one of those Montana fellows who want a mountain of horseflesh under them! He jogged on, taking note that the fences were in good repair. The Mexicans had not been idle in his absence.

The house was between two big trees on a hill near the creek; one room for the kitchen stove and the Mexican's, one room for himself. That little place was a fort. The log walls were safe protection, and the four small windows looked out to every quarter of the valley.

He quickened his horse, now, for he could see at the hitching rock before his cabin a fine, tall gray, with silverwork on his saddle. The man who owned such a horse as that would be most likely to have an open purse to buy another.

Clattering noises came from the kitchen and, looking through the door, Pleasant saw that the stranger was helping himself to a cup of coffee and frying a few slices of bacon.

"Howdy," said Pleasant, throwing his reins.

"Howdy," said the man.

He was a big fellow, wide and heavy in the shoulders, gaunt about the waist. Then he turned, and Pleasant instinctively went for his gun, for he found himself looking into the brown face and the keen gray eyes of the brother of Charlie Rizdal—"Long Tom" in the flesh!

Long Tom showed no alarm whatever. He put the coffee pot on the back of the stove and extended his hand.

"Before we shake," suggested Pleasant, "tell me if you know about Charlie?"

"Sure do." Long Tom nodded. "I've come to see the man who was good enough to take him. Well, Pleasant, I'm going to use you!"

PLEASANT JIM smiled a little.

"All right," he said.

"I want from five days to a week of your time. You'll need two fast horses, and you'll have to have your wits about you."

"Go on," said Pleasant Jim.

"I want you to ride two days from here and light a fire on a mountain. There are people who don't want that fire to be lighted. They might try to

give you a bad time. What would you name as a prize for that?"

"About five hundred dollars," said the rancher.

"I'll make it a thousand," replied Long Tom instantly.

"Mind you, if there's anything crooked about it, I'll have nothing to do with it. I've got my work cut out for me here and what if I have to lose this for the sake of a thousand that looks easy but ain't?"

"It's a snug little valley," said the bandit, "but I'd choke without a bigger horizon than this. And now I'll tell you. All you'd have to do would be to take this matchbox, filled with these same matches, which you're not to use on your cigarettes. Maybe you'll see a fire blaze up to answer you on one of the nearest peaks. If you do, just put your fire out, and a few inches under the ashes, bury this here matchbox. After that you can come home."

"If there was no answering fire?"

"Then you go back to the top of the mountain three nights running and light the fire every night. If there's no answer after that, you come back and bring the box and matches with you. I'd do this job myself, but I got to get Charlie out."

"You'll manage that?" Pleasant Jim grinned.

"It's nothing," replied the outlaw. "But look at your own part. All you know is, if you're caught, that somebody gave you this box of matches and told you what to do with it. Nobody can hang you for that."

One thousand from twenty-five hundred would leave fifteen hundred. A few good sales of horses, and he could pay off Lewis Fisher.

"Sometimes," said Pleasant Jim, "you fellows ring in somebody and try to work him all the time afterwards. I fall for this job, but it's the last one. I see no harm in it. But tell me who the gents will be that might try to snag me?"

"Four chances out of five, you won't be bothered. The fifth chance is that a lot of hard-boiled gents with a United States marshal at their head may try to lag you."

Pleasant Jim whistled softly. "A marshal?"

"Does that come too high?"

"I'll take the job," Pleasant Jim said.

Long Tom took out a wallet, counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills and laid them upon the table.

"There you are," he said. "I trust you, Pleasant. You know Black Mountain?"

"I know it."

"You might as well start today. Tomorrow night there may be somebody watching to see a fire. If you have to shoot at all, I advise you to shoot straight. . . ."

Pleasant Jim waited only to see the Mexicans, and call for two horses. They brought him a ten-year-old mare, a seasoned traveler, and a white-stockinged gelding that went a bit lame in the morning but could gallop the rest of the day. Then he rode toward Black Mountain.

He camped that night at the foot of the range, tired, but well ahead of his schedule. In the gray of the morning he was up again. He built a small fire, and made coffee. Hardtack and dried figs were his food, and when he had finished eating he destroyed every vestage of the blackened site.

The horses had grazed on good bunch grass, but he wanted them fresh for the possible danger of the night, therefore he went on foot, leading the horses slowly from ridge to ridge as he approached Black Mountain.

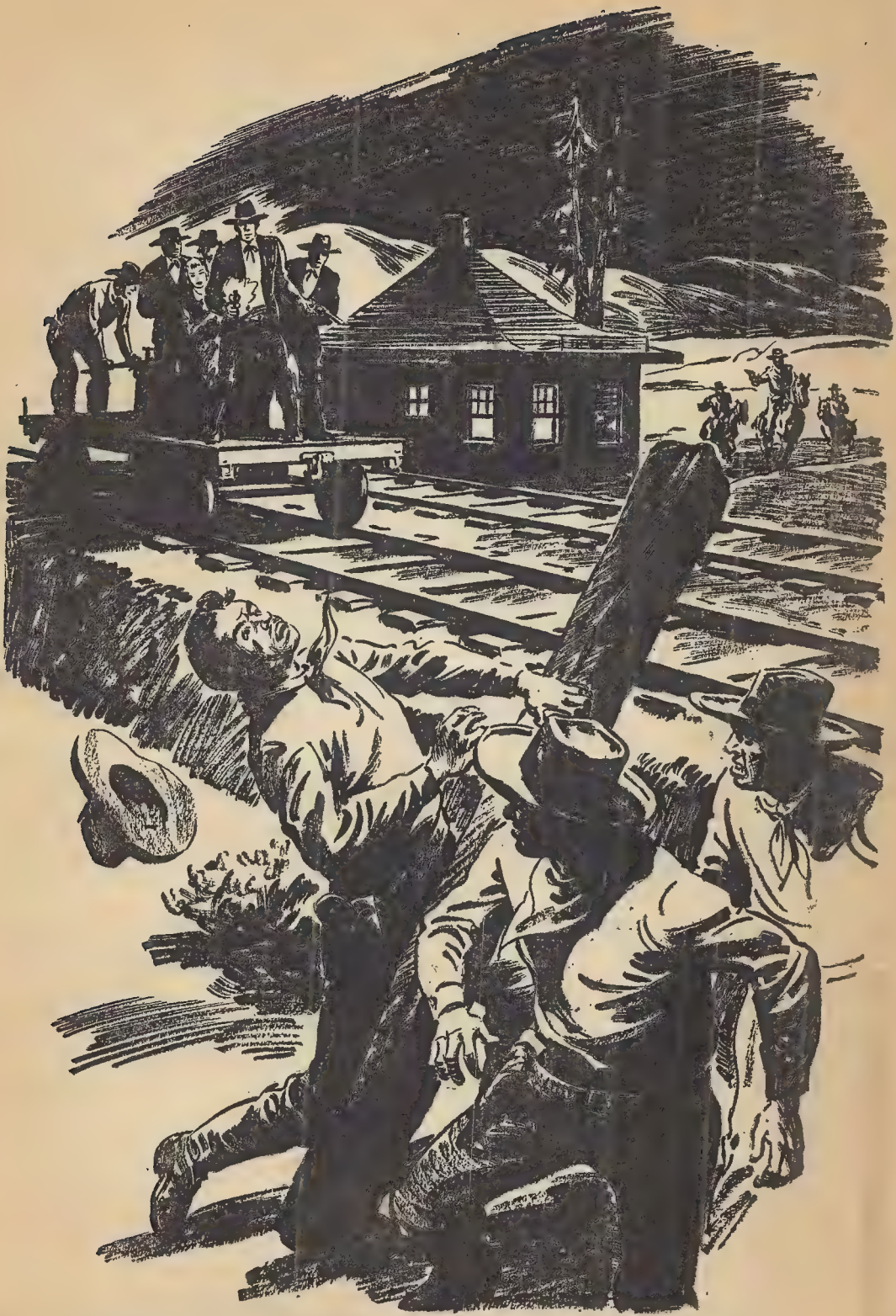
Before evening, he had fairly assured himself that Long Tom's expectations of danger must be wrong. Then, when the dusk began, he wound slowly up toward the height.

He reached the top and all the valleys below him were pooled with thick darkness, but the final glow covered the tall peaks that were like spear points raised above a shadowy army. Pleasant Jim picked out a stretch of good grass just below the summit where the horses could graze, then took note of a circle of old stones upon the very crest.

He set about gathering the materials for a bonfire among the brush—brush large enough, he noted grimly, to mask the cautious approach of twenty men.

WHEN it was completely dark, at last, he lighted the fire. So furiously did it burn that little twigs and fragments of the bushes soared upward.

If a signal were waited for, this could not fail to be seen from any of the neighboring summits. But Pleasant discovered not so much as one glimmer of



Pleasant fired from the hand-car and man and timber fell in a heap (CHAP. V)

answering light. He watched the mountains and peered down the slopes of the Black Peak, but there was not the slightest signal.

There was nothing further for him to do. So he prepared for bed, making down his blankets on the edge of the small pasture where he had left the horses.

The first sign of light wakened him. He washed in a little spring, made his breakfast fire and finished off a brief meal, covering the traces of the little fire with all of the precautions he had used before.

He went back to the summit, moving as cautiously as if rifles might be picking him off from one of the heights. On the top, he scanned the landscape.

All was crystal clear. There was not a trace of dust. So he could see details with his naked eye, but he preferred to study the important points with the glass. Patiently he probed every suspicious patch of shadow.

Though he saw nothing to alarm him, a twitching of the nerves, a peculiar keenness in his senses, and a vague shadow of fear disturbed him, like the pressure of another mind upon his own.

At length, turning his attention from the distance to the summit on which he stood, he found first-hand evidence that danger actually was around him. For in a patch of soft earth at the edge of a rock, he saw the outline of a shoe—heel and sole—and such a shoe as he himself never had worn.

Pleasant was no typical cowpuncher. He refused to crowd his feet into the high-heeled boots which may hold a stirrup well enough but which leave one floundering on dry land like some foolish amphibian. He searched hastily for more signs, but whoever had made that impression had done the rest of his walking upon the rocks.

Perhaps he was still here, hidden in the brush; perhaps he had gone down to warn his companions that Black Mountain was occupied; perhaps at this moment he was stealing the two horses! In a panic, Pleasant hurried to them and breathed more easily as he stood between them.

It was a long, weary day. His rifle was never out of his hand while he gathered another pile of brush, and every time a branch crackled in his hands, he paused to listen and to watch.

The dull eternity of the afternoon went by at last and his heart began to return with the dusk. The darkness grew and once more he kindled a fire, taking care to apply the match to a section of dry leaves and twigs. His reward was an instant up-burst of flame and in a few moments the shaking arm of red was brandishing above Black Mountain.

It was at its very height when an eye of crimson looked at him across the valley from a lower peak. That winking point of light towered into a bonfire, and Pleasant flung on his own blaze a few rocks, then a tarpaulin loaded with pebbles and sand. His blaze was not extinguished save at one side, but into the sand he thrust the little metal matchsafe and sprang to his horses.

Below him the slope was studded with big rocks like the crenelated top of a wall, and through one of the embrasures he saw a shadowy form moving swiftly upward. Another shadow appeared beyond a second opening between the great stones, and Pleasant could guess that he had not seen all of the party. Leading the horses, he hurried to the farther side of the peak and there saw nothing immediately beneath him. It was the roughest way down the slope, but he knew he must go that way. So he sprang into the saddle on the mare. The gelding he cast loose.

Then, not twenty yards behind him, he heard the rolling of a rock and a stifled curse. The touch of the spur urged the mare headlong down the steep slope.

No men on that side? She had not made three strides when two voices shouted at him from a clump of shrubbery to halt. He tried a snapshot above their heads and in return two rifles clanged.

No men on that side?

He heard a half-dozen—they seemed a half-hundred to Pleasant as a crescent fear mastered him—shouting to one another:

"It's Long Tom Rizdal! Shoot, shoot!"

II

FROM behind rocks and bushes shadows leaped out and rifles swung to shoulders. But they were firing at a target that moved downward like an avalanche. The mare darted through a maze

of boulders and brush, and came to a long plunge of gravel. Sitting well back on her haunches, she tobogganed down. At the bottom of it the gelding shot past them, and tumbled head over heels. He was up again like a cat, and galloping at the side of the mare across the lower reaches of Black Mountain. All the noise was far behind them, and it came from men on foot!

Pleasant and his horses had descended the upper parapet of the mountain and were dropping now into the valley. No doubt danger was safely distanced, but if enemies lay before him they would have something better than starlight to shoot by, for a treacherous moon now stood up on the shoulder of an eastern peak and turned the valley pale.

Pleasant checked the mare and, sitting still in the saddle, he cupped his ear against the wind and listened. His caution quickly rewarded him, for straight before him, muffled by the wind, he heard the dull beating of hoofs.

He barely had started the mare north when half a dozen riders came around the foot of Black Mountain in single file, pouring after him. Glancing over his shoulder he saw them gaining, so he settled the mare into a racing stride. For a full mile they flew before Pleasant looked back again and chuckled grimly when he saw the gap he had opened. Then—he had practiced it many a time—he changed to the saddle of his spare horse.

The posse rode gallantly and well, but they failed behind the gelding. In half an hour up the hard grade of White's Ravine he left the pursuit out of hearing.

All that night Pleasant headed steadily through the lower valleys and into the foothills. There, at dawn, he made camp, slept for three hours, and took up the trail again. In the dusk he made the head of Fisher's Valley, and so came to his own lower gate, feeling the honest satisfaction that only comes with weariness and labor well-ended.

The following morning he sent Pedro to the bank with the thousand dollars. He had work at hand on the ranch, and was hungry to fill his hands. So, from a cloud of dust of his own raising within the barn, he looked up and saw that he had guests—two at the rear door of the barn, and another couple striding toward him.

One of those visitors was Sam Lee, Federal Marshal for the district!

"Well, Sam," said he, "what are you trailing through my diggings?"

Sam Lee was a little man, rather withered, ever smiling. To some people his smile seemed a grimace.

"I'm a mortal weary man, Jim," said the marshal, pausing to pass a bandana across his forehead. "I'm dragged back and forth across the country the way you wouldn't work a dog."

"Sit down and rest your feet," suggested Pleasant. "You boys sit down, too."

The two from the rear door had sauntered in and joined the marshal. Sam Lee accepted the invitation with a wave of the hand, but the other three did not stir. Their gloomy eyes remained fixed upon the rancher. Fear began to grow strong in Pleasant Jim.

"And what you been doing, Sam?" he asked, as Lee settled himself on the barley bin.

"I been chasing, and chasing," said the marshal, "and I got nothing to show for it."

"Chasing what?"

"At Black Mountain," said the sheriff. "I was trying to run down a job!"

"That's rough country," said Pleasant Jim. "What sort of a job?"

"The worst kind," said the officer gravely. "Someone hooked up with that snaky devil, Tom Rizdal. I went for a man, but all that I got was this!"

He took from his pocket a small metal matchbox. He opened it, and shook the matches out into his hand.

"Maybe you can find the gent that owned it," said Pleasant.

"Oh, Rizdal owned it, of course," went on Sam Lee. "He's a ghost—fades out into solid stone, you might say. Got friends salted away in every corner of the hills."

"Well," said Jim, "I don't suppose that matches tell much of a yarn, at that."

"Don't you?" murmured the marshal. "No, you wouldn't—a good, honest law-abidin' fellow like you. But me, I been forced to be suspicious of everything. So I put these matches under a glass and what you think I seen?"

Jim was frozen with interest.

"Little pricks all running down the sides of 'em. Telegraphic letters, you see; and arranged in code. Well, well,

the tricks that the crooks are up to! We pelted after the feller that left this matchbox on the top of Black Mountain, but he skinned right away from us. He had two horses, and I never hope to see their like again—unless it was right here on your fine horse-ranch, Pleasant!"

THE blow came sharply home, but Pleasant Jim stirred not a muscle of his face.

"Yes, I'd like to match any pair that runs in these parts," he observed. "You had a hard ride, Sam?"

"When I seen him going like a bird, I just pulled up and knew that the game had gone bust. Back I comes to Fisher Falls with nothin' but a matchbox to show for the work of nigh twenty men for two days. And no sooner back in Fisher Falls than I get more work to do. I go past Mr. Tucker, the cashier of the bank, and he says: 'What you think of this?' He handed me a little envelope. This here one."

Sam Lee took the envelope from his pocket, and from it he took a little sheaf of greenbacks—even at the distance Pleasant could see the corner figures—one hundred dollars. His throat became dry.

"This here money," said Sam Lee, "looks good, and it's printed with a lot of care, but it's queer. And I come out here to ask you where you got it, Pleasant."

"Is that my money?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's your money," said the marshal softly, "because as soon as the cashier seen it, he labeled it quick and put it right back into the envelope that you'd sent it in. What horses have you been selling lately, Pleasant?"

"That money came to me through the mail," said Pleasant Jim. "There was a batch waiting for me when I got back from the Charlie Rizdal trail."

"A fine job you done on that trail," said the marshal. "Maybe you saved the letter it come in?"

"No."

"An old debt, I guess?" said the sympathetic marshal.

"Yes."

"I would wish to be picking a thousand out of the mail, some day," sighed Sam Lee. "What was the money owed for?"

"Oh, a couple of horses I sold a while back."

"They must have been bang-up fine ones. Who did you make the sale to, Pleasant?"

"A gent that was passing through—stranger."

"Hello! You give a stranger a couple of fine horses on trust?"

"No, I didn't trust him. He gave me a deposit."

"Ah, he'd paid some money beforehand. And now a thousand more—and for two horses!"

Pleasant suddenly began to sweat. "It wasn't money he left me. He left me a ring. That was my security. I was to keep it a year, and if he didn't send the money by that time—"

"It takes a good ring to be worth a thousand, doesn't it? I'd like to have a look at it."

"I sent it away, after I got the money."

The marshal nodded. "Wouldn't want to have a valuable thing like that lying around loose. What sort of a looking fellow was this one?"

"Dark-haired fellow. Looked a good deal like Chuck, there."

"Chuck" started and cursed. "I'll have you know—"

"You, Chuck, shut your face," said the marshal peremptorily. "Jim, let's hear some more about the crook that beat you. Let's get down again to what he looked like. Middle-aged, you said?"

"Yes."

"And gray hair?"

"Yes," answered Pleasant.

There was a loud laugh from Chuck.

"He looked like me, a minute ago," said Chuck, "and now he's middle-aged and got gray hair."

"By jiminy," murmured Sam Lee, "I'm afraid you'll have to explain that to the judge, Pleasant. And in the meantime, I got to ask you for your guns."

So Jim Pleasant went to jail. There he stood in a little room and had to answer questions: "What was his full name? Where was he born? What was his occupation? Had he ever been in jail before and if so for what offense?

"Heck, Danny," he said to the jailer, "you can answer all those questions about as good as I can. Why do you ask 'em?"

"Matter of form," said the other. "I'd get fired if I didn't do it this way."

The marshal explained that Pleasant must be lodged in a cell with some other prisoner.

"I've got a full house, here," he explained.

"You're going to shove me into a cell, are you, without letting me talk to the judge?" asked Pleasant.

The marshal was full of sympathy. "I'd like to do it," he explained. "But you don't know the way the judge is. Everything has to be regular with him . . . Here's a place for him," he added to the jailer.

He had paused before the barred door behind which sat Charlie Rizdal.

"You're going to put me in here?" asked Pleasant, grimly.

"You wouldn't want to be put in with some dirty hobo, would you?" asked Sam Lee.

PLEASANT JIM saw that argument was foolish. The door swung open and he stepped inside.

"Hold on!" cried Rizdal. "Are you going to keep me here with this head-hunter? If you do, I'll throttle him."

"Friendly, ain't they?" said the jailer, grinning. "Marshal, you're a wonder!"

Rizdal burst into a passion of cursing that raised a murmur of interest from the adjoining cells. Then, as though realizing that nothing could be gained by mere talk, he stopped and winked broadly.

Pleasant stared at him.

Rizdal continued in a loud voice: "Pleasant, it was you that landed me in this hole. I'll have your heart out for that little trick."

"I'm a peaceful man," said Pleasant. "I don't hunt trouble. But when it comes my way I aim to use both hands on it."

Rizdal sat down on his cot and took from his pocket a little ivory trinket—the roughly worked shape of an ape, which he set up in the palm of his hand and admired for a moment.

When he spoke again, his voice was carefully modulated.

"I knew the old juju would bring me luck before the finish," said he, "but I never guessed they'd be fools enough to put the pair of us in one cell! Why, Pleasant, we'll crack out of this place almost any time we want. But play up! The minute they guess we're pals, they'll separate us."

Pleasant answered softly: "It's all

Jim hurled himself forward, throwing the stalker to the ground (CHAPTER X)

right, Charlie. I'd never stand in your way, but it's not my game to break jail."

"Wait till they're through with you," said Rizdal calmly.

He picked up a book and, opening it went through the pages rapidly, now and again making a covert notation with a pencil. Pleasant, however, was tired so he stretched himself on his cot, and fell asleep.

He was awakened by the loud voice of Charlie Rizdal, calling: "Hey, you!"

Pleasant Jim wakened with sweat on his brow, and became aware that Charlie was at the barred door, talking to a girl who carried a bucket in one hand and a mop in the other.

It seemed strange to Pleasant that a woman should be allowed in a jail. She possessed a certain prettiness of feature, but there was scant trace of mind stuff in her.

Rizdal spoke to her in a tone of good-natured contempt: "This is a rotten book you gave me," said he. "Nothing happens in it. Here's a quarter. Pick up something that's got a little action, kid! What's your name, anyway?"

"Sally."

"Hey, Sally!" bawled the voice of the jailer. "Ain't I told you not to talk to nobody in here?"

"Comin'!" called Sally.

"D'you think I'm trying to make a crush on this cartoon?" shouted Charlie Rizdal. "I just asked her to buy me a book."

"Swallow your lip, Rizdal!" boomed the jailer. "All right, let her take the quarter."

"Now, Sally," said Rizdal, "if there's a nickel left over, buy yourself a ribbon or something."

"I seen a lovely one in the store for five cents," said Sally.

Rizdal watched her going, then he turned on his cell-companion.

"She's our bet," he said. "Wait till the middle watch, and I'll tell you why!"

In the hush of the night, Pleasant wakened to the whisper of Rizdal:

"Listen, Jim! Are you awake?"

"I'm awake."

"I have the stuff here, now. That Sally—she gave me the saws, the oil and all. Shall we start now, Jim?"

Pleasant sat up in the dark and swung an arm through the darkness.

"I can't do it. It would be junking my life's work, and because of what? Because your brother crooked me with a dirty deal!"

"He'd give a hand to have the doing of that over again."

"How do you know what he'd give?"

"I hear from him every day, and he hears from me. The point is—you won't believe it of a man like Long Tom—he didn't dream that the stuff was queer."

"Well," said Pleasant, "I'm inclined to believe he wouldn't have played the sneak like that. But I'll pull out of this without jumping into outlawry."

"How? Pleasant, they know you carried the matchbox. You can't make them feel you haven't been deep with Long Tom."

"After my job with you, Charlie?"

"They think that you're sort at me and deep with Tom. But they've written you down one of my brother's men, and you'll see a fiver, for this."

"You mean that they'd send me up for five years?"

"Or ten."

"They can't. It's not justice!"

"They're looking for convictions, not for justice. And by the time that you got out of prison, what would be left of your farm?"

JIM PLEASANT grasped the side of his cot and set his teeth. "I'll wait and see it through," he declared at last. "If you have the stuff, go ahead. I won't make a noise about it."

"Old son," chuckled Rizdal, "Long Tom gave me my marching orders in the book Sally brought today. I'm not to step out of this here jail unless I take you with me."

"How could he send a message in a book?"

"Little system of checking off the words. Easy when you know the key. He says he'll never stop if it takes the rest of his life and every penny of his money until he's got you out of this mess."

This was a sort of faith which Pleasant could understand. So he asked about Sally.

She was, according to Charlie Rizdal, of all the associates of Long Tom the most capable and the most trusted by her chief. He had sent her into Fisher Falls the instant his brother had been jailed there, and she had managed the disguise which took her into the jail as a worker there.

III

THE next day Pleasant Jim asked to see the judge and was told that the "old man" had a full day. Then he received a little message from the bank president, Lewis Fisher. Mr. Fisher had come upon evil days, said the note, and he was forced to call in every outstanding loan. He was sorry he had to ask for Pleasant's twenty-five hundred, still outstanding.

The letter slipped from Pleasant's numb fingers and whisked across the floor to Rizdal, who made no pretense of not reading it as he picked it up.

"He'll have the farm in a week, then," said Charlie Rizdal.

"I dunno what you mean," murmured Pleasant. "How *can* he need money? His safe is full of cash securities."

"But the old boy has a taste for horses, and of course he's glad not to have to pay for them," remarked the other. "He'll foreclose on you, and auction off everything you've got!"

Pleasant groaned, then took new hope. "If they wiped out my work, still they'd have to leave with a good deal of cash!"

"You'll probably get about enough to pay Fisher's note."

"I see," chuckled Pleasant, greatly relieved. "I was offered twenty thousand dollars flat, no longer than three months back, and I laughed at old Grindle when he made the offer. Well, he'd bid the place up that high, at least. And Young and Chalmers would like my farm, too."

"If Fisher started bidding on that place of yours, there ain't a wealthy man on the range would dare to bid against him. They keep their hands off when Fisher goes after something, and he keeps his hands off when they've got a plum in the wind. . . ."

Pleasant Jim always had looked upon the judge as rather a good-natured person. On the morning of his examination he changed his mind.

For Pleasant there appeared a gray-headed lawyer from some city. Tom Rizdal, of course, had procured such a defender. The lawyer defended Pleasant with skill, but all was no good.

The judge battered through all of the frail fences the lawyer reared. He fixed bail at ten thousand. It was instantly offered by the lawyer, but the judge calmly declared that he needed twenty thousand, and that if twenty thousand were brought, he would demand a hundred thousand. In a word, he intended to keep Pleasant in jail until the trial.

The second blow was far more serious. It came from the soft hand of Lewis Fisher, and all that Charlie Rizdal had prophesied came to pass.

The news came in the form of a cheerful little note:

Dear Jim Pleasant,

How regrettable it all is! Your place was auctioned off this morning. You will be as astonished as I to learn that there really was no bidding whatever. I think that the farm and everything on it would have gone for fifteen hundred. I didn't want the place myself. However, I simply couldn't sit by and see your place sacrificed so utterly. It would have left you a thousand in my debt after losing your farm. Therefore, I bid it in. What I'll do with it, I don't know. But as soon as you're out of your little difficulties of the present, no doubt you'll agree to manage the property for me.

Yours most sincerely,

LEWIS FISHER

Pleasant was staggered. Then, turning his back sharply upon Rizdal, he went to the window and rested his elbows on the sill.

The sun turned red in the west, and a ruche of crimson and purple cloud came around it, so that it had the look of a drunken clown. Pleasant began to laugh, and as he turned from the window he saw Charlie Rizdal shrink away.

"It's all right, Charlie," said he. "I ain't crazy. I won't do any harm to you. But one of these days I'm going to get my hands on Fisher and I'll make his windpipe crackle under my thumb."

"I have the stuff still waiting," Rizdal said quietly. "We can start tonight to cut through. Or are you going to wait to serve the prison term?"

Pleasant replied with a glance. He dared not trust himself to speech. That night they started work with the saws.

For a full three hours they worked, when it became apparent that they could not finish the task before the morning. A double trellis secured that window, the inner one mere strips, the outer of greater bars. Rizdal announced that he would send word that they were coming through the next night.

And by the following midnight they had completed the cutting. Then, quickly taking down the inner bars, they pried away the outer ones which were secured only by the threads of steel they

had left after their cutting. Rizdal had two blankets knotted together, and he slipped through the window first and dropped to the ground. Pleasant followed, and they moved softly to the rear of the building.

THE night was warm and many people were still up. A sudden alarm sounded from the jail behind them. The front door was cast open, and voices shouted into the night. There was a rush of three horsemen down the street, shouting wildly that the jail was broken.

"They'll have us like fish in a net," suggested Pleasant.

"Here comes our help now," answered Rizdal, and through the shadows came two men, leading saddled horses. "Christy!" went on Rizdal. "Here we are!"

Christy, a short and broad-built silhouette, said, "Tumble aboard, mates. Here, Charlie, this is for you. And here's something special for Pleasant."

Pleasant Jim, in the act of throwing himself into saddle checked himself with an exclamation. "By the Eternal!" said Pleasant. "It's the Leinster gray! How did you—"

"Take now and talk later," urged Christy. "We got to cut out of this town."

"Ride up the street with the first swarm of gents that passes," urged Pleasant. "They'll never recognize us in the dark."

So they came out of the trees and joined a flurry of riders who were pounding hard through the dust. "What's up?" one of them called.

Christy answered in stentorian tones: "Rizdal and Pleasant Jim have busted jail."

The riders turned through the first alley. "Who's there!" called a voice, and a shadow stepped from the brush into the alleyway with the long barrel of a rifle thrown across his forearm.

"Get out of the way!" called Christy. "Pleasant and Rizdal escaped and rode this way."

The man drew back and the four went on.

The racing gallop of the horses pushed Fisher Falls behind them. Before them they had the narrowing canyon of the upper valley, with the mountains drawing in like arms prepared to gather up the fugitives, so that to Pleasant the jagged outlines of the peaks seemed delightful. They meant freedom.

The riders turned from the main valley through a narrow ravine, and up this they rode in the center of a little stream. This was a gap in the trail which would defeat pursuit even with dogs.

They left the creek and came in the gray of the morning to a spacious plateau where cattle were scattered. In the midst was a farmhouse and Christy bore boldly ahead for it. Rizdal explained that the farmer was "right" and had been well-bribed long before.

The farmer welcomed the party and sent his son to the head of the ravine to keep a sharp lookout for any pursuit. Presently four hungry men sat down to a table covered with fried ham, baking-powder biscuits, and great cups of coffee.

Christy appeared in the morning light as a pugilistic type, low-browed, deep-chested and with extraordinarily long arms.

"He's what Tom calls an all-around man," Rizdal said. "He can blow a safe, or use a can opener, and if it comes to a pinch, he handles a gun the way you admire. Now here's Lefty. Lefty, what would you say for yourself?"

"Lefty" was just the opposite of his stocky companion. Pale and thin of face, with lank black hair falling over his forehead, he had a detached air, and his dull, dark eyes wandered slowly here and there.

He smiled faintly, but said nothing to explain himself, and Rizdal continued: "Lefty has a talent for listening to a combination and telling you what's in its mind. In addition, Lefty shoots a little straighter than almost anyone else, except Tom or you, Pleasant. Boys, you know Jim Pleasant put me behind the bars, and he might have landed the rest of us there if the fools who could have used him hadn't decided they'd double-cross him. They'll pay through the nose for that. Fellows, Jim's a man to take to, and Pleasant, Lefty and Joe Christy never will let you down in a pinch."

"I like straight talk," Pleasant observed. "You fellows got me out of jail and I'm grateful but I'm not going to throw in with you. I've worked for my living, and it's too late for me to switch callings."

He received sudden confirmation in the vigorous voice of Christy.

"There ain't any fool in the world," he declared, "like the sap that goes crooked when he can go straight."

"You make up your mind any way you want to jump," Rizdal added, "because nobody's going to press you here. Tom thinks the world of you, and he'd be the last man to want to drag you into anything."

AFTER breakfast, they went to bed, assured by the farmer that fresh horses would be saddled and ready for them, and a strict watch kept.

"What price, Charlie, would your brother put on the gray?" Pleasant asked cautiously.

Rizdal smiled. "Why, man, the horse is yours, of course. And there'll be a thousand of clean money for you, as soon as Tom arrives!"

So Jim Pleasant could not sleep at once. In his brain and in his blood was the thought of the gray, hauntingly persistent. By noon he was out in the pasture. With hungry eyes he devoured the proportions of the tall stallion. Beautifully balanced, made like a watch for fineness, he possessed sixteen hands and a half of go and stamina, and yet Pleasant knew that the big fellow was as neat-footed as a cat.

This horse, worthy of a king, had been given to him by a thief, a smuggler, a bank robber!

In a short time, the others appeared, Christy and Rizdal to lounge about, but Lefty withdrawing to the shade of a tree where he unwrapped a small bit of machinery and began to work with it, his ear bent close to it.

"That's a new combination," Christy explained to Pleasant. "I've seen him spend a hundred hours listening to the tumblers fall! Ain't he hearing a pretty story?"

But Pleasant left them and went back to the pasture. The Leinster gray was eating sugar from his hand when Long Tom Rizdal appeared in the middle afternoon.

He came on a strong bay, blackened with sweat. He drew his brother quietly aside.

"How did he go?" he asked.

"Steady as a clock," answered Charlie. "You were right about him, Tom, but I don't think he'll throw in with us. He is more interested in a horse than in us."

Long Tom thrust out his underhung jaw.

"You don't understand, Charlie," said he. "You've talked horse and money to him. He needs something else!" He went straight to Pleasant and took his hand. "Pleasant, you've been put in torment because of a boner that I pulled. Now tell me what you want to do?"

"What can I do?" Jim asked rather bitterly. "I've got the law after me!"

"Horses are your job, aren't they?"

"They are."

"Then pick some spot where there's good grass and water. Change your name, and buy the land and stock it with the cash I'll give you. No man ever lost money through me."

"And let Lewis Fisher laugh at what he did to me?" exclaimed Pleasant. "They'll have to kill me before I'll let him do that!"

Long Tom sat down on a tree stump and picked a Colt .45 from the spring-holster beneath his arm-pit, lightly bringing it to point on a white-faced stone twenty yards away.

"Old Fisher sticks in your craw, then?" said the smuggler. "But gunwork—is that the thing for him?"

Pleasant was silent.

"Suppose that you walked in and blew him full of holes," said Rizdal. "He'd leave his money and his land and his work behind him for that chalk-faced sneak of a nephew of his to inherit. What sort of revenge would that be? They'd simply make him out a martyr."

Pleasant listened intently, his eyes upon the gun.

"Suppose, though, that you were to snake the soul out of that fat-faced hound and leave him alive to groan and yell?"

"What's his soul?" asked Pleasant Jim.

"I dunno just how much there is of it," replied the other with a smile, "but I can tell you where it lives. It's in the big safe where he keeps his own cash and securities. Suppose that the doors of that safe swung open, there would be the soul of Mr. Fisher to handle the way we please. You follow me?"

"You mean to crack that safe, Tom?"

"I mean to crack that safe. Would you want to be in?"

"They've tried the safe three times," remarked Pleasant. "The first time, three of the yeggs were shot and two

of 'em died. The second time the whole gang was rounded up, betrayed by somebody to old man Fisher. The third time, they got into the office and had to fight to get out of the room."

"The old man figures that luck is on his side," replied Tom Rizdal, 'and he puts everything he's got into that safe. The rest of the profession keep away because they figure the place is poison. Well, maybe it is, but if you're willing, we'll make the try."

"You've got a crew of experts," observed Jim Pleasant. "What use could I be to you?"

FOR this job," replied the other, "we got to have somebody with no more nerves than a chunk of stone."

Rizdal took from his pocket a small notebook and a pencil and rapidly drew a good facsimile of the front of Fisher's Bank.

"Where's the solar plexus of that building?" asked he. "What's under the bank?"

"Why, that row of stores in what used to be the basement. What of that?"

"A lot! Three stores, ain't there? That corner one is where the janitor sells stationery and odds and ends, isn't it? Here's the watchmaker's and jeweler's place in the center, and down at this end is the hardware supplies."

"That's right."

"Well, that center store—that's right under the private office where Fisher has his safe! The lease of the jeweler runs out in four months. I want a safe man to rent that middle shop and appear to run an honest business for a few weeks. Then I want to get into his place and start making a cut into the office of the bank president. It'll mean days of work. And every minute we'll have to be sure that nobody is in the store next door. And all the while that that work goes on, the gent who runs the shop has be keeping up a front. I need a man who can be trusted, and you're the man, Jim!"

"I know you have some sort of meaning," Pleasant declared, "but what it is beats me. I'm known in that town, Tom."

"How well are you known?"

"Why, not a man or a woman or a child, hardly, that don't know my face."

"Sure, they know your face. What else do they know about you? Nothing, I'll bet!"

"But how get by the face?" Jim asked.

"Two months would grow a beard and mustache, and you get weak eyes and have to wear big horn-rimmed spectacles. You've had good schooling, Jim. You talk rough because you've got careless. You concentrate for four months, talking the King's English. You'll change. Right? And speaking a new lingo, who'd spot you with glasses, a beard, and the rest?"

"But what do I know about stores?" murmured the other.

"You know guns, saddles, ropes, everything that goes to a horse or a cowpuncher's outfit, don't you? You know their prices, the best makes, everything. You know rifles and shotguns. The thing for you to do is to open a gunshop in Fisher Falls. After a couple of months of hair-raising, you can travel back East and get into a gunstore as a clerk. I've got a lead that would plant you in a shop. Now, what do you think of the dodge, Pleasant?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow."

"No, let me know in five minutes. Tomorrow I'm due a hundred miles from here. We'd give you two shares on the loot. One-third of everything that we take out of the soul of Lewis Fisher."

"I'm kind of shaky about the idea," replied Jim Pleasant

"You think you are, but you ain't. Try your gun on that rock and you'll see how shaky you really are."

Instinctively, Pleasant obeyed. The heavy Colt glided into his hand, and exploded instantly. The rock jumped into pieces.

"I told you so!" Long Tom Rizdal grinned.

IV

MR. FISHER was a man who believed that there were few facts in life when time and thought would not surpass accident and swiftness of decision. Therefore Mr. Fisher was in no haste to rent according to the proposal in a letter upon his desk.

It said simply:

Dear sir,

We understand that your bank is located in the central portion of Fisher Falls, and that beneath it there is quarters for a small store. We contemplate opening a gun shop in Fisher Falls,

and we are prepared to offer you thirty dollars a week for the location of which we speak. We understand that it is shortly to be vacant. Will you kindly let us know at an early date if this proposal interests you?

Yours very truly,
WILLIAM J. FOXHALL,
for Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall, Ltd.

The letter was interesting, and the rent offered was some twenty or twenty-five per cent greater than Mr. Fisher had expected to receive. On the other hand, he was not altogether pleased with the idea of a gunshop beneath the bank. It would mean a constant gathering of idle and curious cowboys and detract from the dignity of the bank.

He wrote back, at last, asking to see their representative. They replied that a trusted subordinate, Mr. Struthers Holman, who had been selected to open the store in Fisher Falls, would call upon Mr. Fisher.

Then Mr. Holman called.

Mr. Fisher liked him at once, for he was a tall, solemn, quiet man who wore a short, sharply pointed beard, and closely trimmed mustache. There was just a touch of the funeral about the fellow. However, Struthers Holman assured Fisher that Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall, Ltd. carried only the best of guns and ammunition, together with knives, some saddles, and other items to please the Westerner.

Mr. Fisher was satisfied. He shook hands with Mr. Struthers Holman, and the strong, large hand of the gun merchant amazed him. Mr. Fisher liked strong men; he was a strong man himself, but his strength was rather of the spirit than of the flesh. He was delighted when, behind glass cases, the glimmering shotguns and rifles were displayed in dark and terrible beauty. Whenever he stepped in, Holman was sure to wait upon him with a deferential courtesy.

"I hope you are going to like Fisher Falls," said Mr. Fisher. "Because you are the sort of person we want here even if you have to write with your left hand."

He laughed at his little jest, and Mr. Holman smiled gravely. After an accident to his right wrist he had lost control of the fingers and had had to learn to write with his left hand—a scrawling, scratchy signature!

"You are making a good thing of this place," said Mr. Fisher. "But you have one weakness. You don't know people, Holman! You've employed that stodgy square-jawed fellow as one clerk, and that absent-minded one as another. You've hired that simple-minded girl who used to do the drudgery at the jail. The creature's a half-wit, Holman."

Holman made a deprecatory gesture.

"As for the two clerks—the firm sent them out to give them experience in a new field. They expect to open other stores through the West. As for the girl—what you say is true, but she's too simple-minded to steal!"

"Ah?" said Fisher. "I see you have thought the thing out."

When Fisher left the store, two clerks who had been busy at the gun racks, and a pale-faced drudge who had been scrubbing in a distant corner, turned to Struthers Holman.

"And now what does the old sap have to say?" asked Joe Christy.

"He just pointed out," said Struthers Holman, "that you look like a square-jawed crook, and that Lefty seems to be an absent-minded idiot. He thinks I

[*Turn page*]

ought to fire you and get a new layout."

"At least," said the girl, "he didn't pick on me."

"He said you were simple-minded," answered Pleasant.

"There's more blood in a turnip than in the brain of that old boy," said the girl. "I'm dead for a smoke, Pleasant. Do I get it?"

"Come back here where the crates are," said Pleasant.

They sat down in the rear of the shop and she lighted a cigarette, sitting cross-legged on a box-head.

"You're tired," suggested Pleasant.

"Tired of my game, tired of everything," said she.

"Suppose the deal goes through," said he, "what will you do with your split?"

"Me? Oh, I'll take my share back East and build Mother a new house. Maybe I'll marry, Jim. A girl wants to marry and have children."

"Go back now!" he exclaimed. "Pull out of this mess, Sally. You're too good for it. And you've done enough already to deserve your share. I'll see to it that you get the coin."

"Will you?" said Sally. "Good old Jim!"

SHE smiled at him with such childish trust that suddenly he stood up and walked away to conceal his emotions.

Christy examined him with a critical eyes as he strode past, and then turned towards Lefty. With solemnity Lefty winked. Christy went and stood before the girl.

"You promised the Chief," said he, "and you've busted your word!"

"I don't know what you mean, Christy," said the girl.

"You been making a fool of the Big Boy again."

"What business is it of yours?" she asked with sudden savagery.

"What chance has he got against you?"

"Am I poisoning his soup?" she asked fiercely.

"I'm gunna spoil your little game, kid," declared the yegg. "I'm gunna blow to the Chief."

She smiled again, and leisurely blew a long puff of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Him too!" said Christy. "You got him twisted around your finger, too! Suppose I let Pleasant Jim know the facts about you?"

"Go on," said the girl, unperturbed. "He'd have a gun on you, Christy, before you got halfway through that little recitation."

Joe Christy began to perspire. "Why d'you do it, Sally? You been a square shooter. Why d'you pick on poor Pleasant?"

"It's a dull life," answered the girl. "Besides," she added with some heat, "who's Jim Pleasant?"

"I'll tell you if you don't know," replied the yegg. "He's hell on wheels. And if you get him into a tangle, he's gunna smash things generally."

"You love him, don't you, you bull-faced toad?" said Sally amiably. "And yet it's you that's taking him down the line, you and the rest of you? Who started it? Me? No! I'll beat you to it and tell him what you've told me!"

She slipped from the box and started for the door, but Joe Christy caught her by the wrists. "Don't you do it, Sally. You'll make him kill me. What pleasure'll that be to you?"

Sally desisted, white and angry.

"All right," she said. "Unclamp my hands. And leave me be, Joe. I do no harm to you, and you do no harm to me. And so far as the Big Boy goes, how d'you know I wouldn't make as good a wife for him as the next one?"

"Wife?" he said, blinking at her. "Sally, have a heart, will you?"

Joe Christy had no sooner got inside the other room than he dodged backward.

"Who's held a gun on you now?" asked the girl sharply.

"There's Sam Lee, the marshal, and I'd rather look at a rattler than at him! He's talking with the Big Boy!"

"Sam Lee!" breathed the girl. "What's he doing here?"

Seizing a polishing cloth, she sallied out.

As big Jim Pleasant saw the man of the law enter, he said to Lefty: "Go handle that fellow. It's Sam Lee!"

Lefty calmly advanced upon the little marshal, and soon he was deep in the explanation of an automatic.

The marshal was full of exclamations, but presently he called upon Jim Pleasant.

"Now, sir," he said to Pleasant, "I'd like to have you tell me: why shouldn't everybody in the world that wants to use a gun have an automatic? Why

should there be such a thing as the poor old single-action Colt?"

Pleasant picked up the gun—with his left hand.

"Well, sir," he said, "for a person who doesn't want fine shooting, I suppose you couldn't beat an automatic. She squirts a stream of lead like water coming out of a hose. And anybody tagged by a drop of the water from *this* nozzle, is pretty sure to drop and stay down."

"Can you handle this gun?" murmured the marshal.

"A little, sir."

"There's a range right down the street," said the marshal. "Would you mind coming down and showing me what it can do?"

So Jim Pleasant was forced much against his will to accompany the marshal. Lefty found an excuse for joining —to carry an extra case of guns and ammunition.

On the way, the marshal said: "You've been at this work for a long time, I suppose?" said he.

"Three years," said Pleasant Jim.

"Well, well! And here's the range."

A slatternly middle-aged woman ran the place. In the background, a red ball bobbed upon a steady stream of water, and against the steel-plated wall a procession of white ducks constantly appeared and disappeared.

"We've brought along some newfangled guns, Mrs. Holstein," said the marshal. "Now, let me see what that automatic can do, Mr. Holman."

PLEASANT JIM took up the automatic and directed it at the red ball. A shower of seven shots answered his pull on the trigger. The fountain was cut by three of the impacts, but the ball still floated.

"Well, well!" murmured the admiring marshal. "If that had been a man, he would be about cut in two, I reckon. What's wrong with the gun, Mr. Holman? I'd rather have it than a dozen of the old single-action Colts like this one!" And he brought into his hand a long Colt.

"Everybody to his own taste," answered Pleasant. "But the single-action gun has its points. It shoots harder and straighter."

"Ay, but even a single-action gun wouldn't be hitting that little red ball."

"Wouldn't it?" said Pleasant Jim.

"Here's a gun," said the marshal. "And here's five dollars that says it can't be done—say, in three shots."

A faint smile touched the bearded lips of Pleasant.

"Give me the Colt," said he. "Here's my five. I'll have a couple of shots first, to see that the old gun shoots straight. Watch the ducks."

Tilting the weapon from the hip, he fired twice. Two ducks fell over.

"It's a good gun and a true one," admitted Pleasant Jim. "And if I can't hit the ball with this, I can't hit it at all! Now, Mr. Colt, stand by me!"

He raised the gun, extended it to arm's length and, dropping it on the target, hit the water column just below the ball.

He turned the weapon on the second little fountain; the red ball was knocked from sight; and from the third fountain the third shot blew the target.

"Hai!" cried Mrs. Holstein. "Who's shot like that in here since Jim Pleasant's day?"

"Wonderful!" said the marshal. "And left-handed, Mrs. Holstein! And a man who's handled guns only three years! Well, sir, I admire how you done it. I never was gladder to spend five bucks in my life. When I ask for a posse the next time I'm gunna call on you special, Holman."

Jim Pleasant got back to the store, and found Long Tom waiting for him.

"I thought that marshal must have marched you away to jail, Jim," said he.

Pleasant was cheerful. "The old marshal ain't a bad sort. He came in asking about automatics. I could have sold him one, but I told him to stick by the single-action Colt. And he asked me to come down the street and show him what the automatic could do at Mrs. Holstein's place. I couldn't hit the red ball on the fountain with the automatic. But I got it with a single-action gun that the marshal handed me. And, Tom, I got five dollars of his money!"

"If you got five dollars of his money," Long Tom Rizdal said, "he'll have five years of your life!"

"You think he's suspecting something?" asked the big man.

"Why should he be here asking for automatics when he's cursed those guns every day of his life?" asked Long Tom. "He wanted an excuse to get inside the

shop—and he's had his look around. He's had his look at you! Pleasant, I thought this bank was as good as in our hands, but I begin to think that we're going to miss the richest haul that ever was inside of my fingers!"

Saturday night had been set for the date of cutting through the ceiling of the shop and gaining admittance to the office of the bank president. Long Tom, the girl, Pleasant, Christy, and Lefty gathered in the store silently. Behind the drawn curtains of the front windows, and the front door, they had hung heavy blankets, not only to make it impossible for light from within the store to reach the street but also to muffle any sounds of hammering. Sally was posted at the outer door, because her ears were sharp.

They had to wait a long time. But finally Sally gave word that the time to commence work had come. Pleasant, striking hard and fast, bit rapidly into the concrete, and the thick flakes he dislodged showered down upon the padding with which they had covered the floor. He was soon up to the flooring, which proved to be a double layer of hardwood and made sawing difficult, particularly since Long Tom insisted that the work should be done with such care that the office carpet should not be injured.

The planking was cut through, and they climbed up into the private office of Lewis Fisher. They dared not show a light, but Lefty had a cigar going, and by the dim red illumination he read the combination and fell on his knees beside the safe to listen.

IT SEEMED to Jim Pleasant almost amusing that this absent-minded dreamer should be the cutting edge of the whole of Long Tom's machine. A full quarter of an hour slipped away. Then Lefty stood up and stretched.

"He's beaten!" said Long Tom fiercely. "Christy, I'm going to blow the safe, and we'll take our chances on getting what we can."

"We'd get jail, and that's all," declared Joe Christy calmly. "Are you done for, Lefty?"

Lefty answered briefly, "Tell me the numbers. I can hear the tumblers fall, now."

Lefty dropped to his knees again, and Joe Christy leaned beside him. From time to time, Lefty stopped, and when he stopped, Christy whispered the number indicated. Long Tom, dropping on one knee, wrote the quoted numbers on a pad. There was a little click, and the wide door of the safe fell slowly back. As the door reached its full width, there was another little click, and a broad electric light was shining down upon them, making the entire inside of the bank brilliant.

One gasp came from every throat, but Pleasant leaped for the steel fence of the cashier's cage, and sprang up to the second row of bars. There he was able to reach the light, and as he struck it a little tinkling shower of glass fell on the floor.

After that light, it seemed certain that the whole town must guess what was happening in the bank. Lefty, his nerves gone, slipped down into the shop below.

The rest, however, seemed steady enough and now had to make quick time, for the flare of light might well have attracted attention.

The strength of that safe was in its walls of steel, and not in the individual boxes it contained. They gave readily under skillful handling, and into a broad bit of canvas all the loot was dumped.

Every one of the boxes was opened. The safe doors were closed again and locked, the trifling debris was gathered up, and down through the hole in the floor they went, pushing the carpet back into place. Beneath, they had arranged a prop with a board on top so that no one stepping on the place where the hole had been cut would have any idea that robbers had come that way.

V

PLEASANT JIM proposed that they start for their horses at once, at the edge of the town where Charlie Rizdal was to have the animals ready. Loot could be divided later on.

But Long Tom was adamant.

"Nobody has spotted us," he declared, "or they would have been at us long before this. It will be about Monday at ten, when they open that safe, that they'll see what's happened, and after that it may be a time before they think to examine the floor of the office. We've got to divide the stuff now, because if we don't, it will be too bulky."

All manner of odds and ends had been emptied from the drawers of the vault. There were old accounts, and ledgers, and even files of letters.

"There's stuff here," commented Long Tom, "that would make old Fisher yell if it were to be published."

It was a fixed business principle of Lewis Fisher's that ruined him now. Hard cash was what he worshiped, and his sense of power had been fed by the knowledge that in the safe in his office there was a store of wealth which could be converted almost instantly into money.

The wealth of Lewis Fisher, therefore, lay heaped upon that broad canvas strip. Three shares went to Long Tom, one for his brother, and two for the chief who had planned the job. There was a share apiece for Sally, for Joe Christy, and for Lefty. Two shares were reserved for Pleasant Jim.

The sum total was the magnificent amount of eight hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars. Two hundred and sixteen thousand of the bulk was handed to Pleasant Jim, and he stuffed it into a money-belt. He was smiling when two sharp blows were struck at the front door of the gun shop.

Lefty whirled to run for the rear exit, but Long Tom caught him with a hand of iron.

"You fool," he whispered, "you can lay they've spread the strongest net behind the shop. Out the front way, all of us. No shooting! Club your guns unless it's life or death. Pleasant!"

He glided toward the door, with Jim Pleasant beside him. Long Tom turned the key in the lock and jerked the door open. Pleasant sprang through, his revolver raised, and he saw before him three men, close together. Weapons glimmered in their hands. One gun was fired, but it merely sent a bullet into the pavement. Then Rizdal and Pleasant reached them, with Christy behind and Lefty snarling like a panther. Down went the three. Two lay crumpled and silent, stunned by the blows. The third writhed blindly as the fugitives rushed on and began to scream:

"Help! Killers!"

That voice tore through the night, and with each piercing syllable, a red pang of fear shot across the brain of Jim Pleasant. He had fallen back and he half turned, his gun poised. But the girl, at whose side he had placed himself, tore at his arm.

"You fool!" she gasped. "Do you want to hang?"

He went on beside her, and both dodged into the dark mouth of the alley.

Noise began to sweep over all of Fisher Falls; men shouted; dogs barked. But Long Tom, in the alley's darkness, halted his band. They stood close together, breathing hard.

"What's to do?" asked Lefty. "What's the plan, Chief?"

"We're cut off from Charlie and the horses," Long Tom said. "They're clear on the other edge of the town. We'll have to head for the railroad. The straightest way out of town would be along the ties, and perhaps when Charlie hears the noise, he may guess that we've gone on foot that way, and he'll bring the horses to us along the track."

They followed willingly as the tall leader went on toward the railroad. Jim Pleasant was in the rear, still with the girl.

"Now, don't you be a big sap, Jim!" she panted as they went. "If the pinch comes, let me go. I can take care of myself."

Pleasant Jim looked down at her. He said nothing. And his silence spoke to her more than words. She wasted no more breath in protests, but kept on doggedly behind the others.

They reached the little railroad yard and got into the shadow of some heaps of ties as a small cavalcade of horsemen swept out of town and poured along the road toward the station.

And then, from a neighboring yard, they heard the piping voice of a child saying:

"That way! Towards the railroad yard!"

Crouched in the shadow of a pile of ties, the hunted looked back and saw three men with rifles or shotguns pause at the edge of the nearest fence. Lefty's nerve forsook him so far that he insisted on thrusting his share of the loot under the pile of ties.

"Down the track a little, in that shed," said Long Tom softly, "is a hand-car. On the downgrade we ought to make that car walk along faster than a horse could run!"

HE GAVE them a new touch of life. Jim Pleasant and Long Tom pushed

ahead, leaving the others well behind, and Pleasant was far ahead when he reached the hand-car shanty and whirled around its corner into the sight of two Negroes playing craps by the aid of a railroad lantern.

"You Jack and Joe!" commanded Pleasant harshly. "Tumble into the shed and help us roll out that car!"

The stimulus of the revolver made them act. They rushed feverishly into the shed as Long Tom came up. The doors were thrown open, and the ponderous car was put aboard the rails, and the party swarmed aboard it while Long Tom tossed a handful of silver to the Negroes. They put their shoulders to the hand-car and gave it a flying start.

Hardly flying enough, indeed, for straight down the track came a mob of a dozen men, bristling with guns. One of them called out loudly for the fugitives to surrender and the rest dropped on their knees to fire.

But Jim Pleasant, with careful gun, sent two bullets whistling about their ears. It would have been easy to drive every shot home, but his wide experience had taught him that the sound of a bullet often will do more than the impact. The knot of heroes on the track melted away with yells of fear. Now the pumping handles were beginning to pick up speed. The hand-car shot out of view around the curve.

"Drop the car off the rails and take to the woods as soon as we're clear of the town," snorted Joe Christy, as he worked his turn. "They'll telegraph to the Lower Falls and cut us off there!"

"We have a ten times better chance if we get into the bigger country that lies beyond," said Long Tom. "Will you risk the Falls, boys?"

They did not answer, except to pump at the handles more swiftly.

On the front of the hand-car sat Sally. Despite the wind that poured into her face, she took down her hair, hitherto pinioned at the back of her head, and did it deftly into a knot at the nape of her neck. And with her handkerchief she scrubbed the red from her nose.

The moon rose and showed the world an altogether altered Sally. Pleasant Jim had sight of her as he stepped to join the crew at the handles while the car approached the scattered hovels of the Lower Falls. As they came, it seemed that they could see the fireflies of danger lighted before them, sparks gleaming from the windows of the cabins.

"Faster—faster!" said Long Tom, and they began to saw up and down with all their might.

Fiercely they increased their speed and took the curve before the station, rocking with the violence of their impetus. The moon was well up by this time, and they saw men coming, some on horseback and some on foot, and three or four, in the lead, just scrambling up the bank.

"Drive 'em back or we're done!" ordered Long Tom.

Pleasant Jim straightened his aching back, and stood against the wind with a gun in either hand. He was frightened, but his brain was as clear as stars on a cold winter night. He placed his shots with skill. He raked the ground with the first pair so that the cinders the bullets raised must have been dashed into the faces of those who were climbing the bank. Several fell back, shouting, and only two men gained the upper level and ran on toward the track. Each was carrying a small timber and their purpose was plain. So much as a pebble placed on the rails would probably knock over the hand-car.

Just below the hips of the first man Pleasant Jim drew his bead. It was not easy to fire from the rocking, rushing hand-car, but it was much like firing from the back of a galloping horse—only easier!

He fired. The man ran on and raised his timber to throw it on the tracks. He fired again, and man and timber fell in a heap. His companion lost all interest and dropping his piece, turned and fled wildly for safety, while the hand-car shot past.

A scattering of rifle shots rang behind them, but then they drove on past a line of freight cars on the siding, and had shelter until another curve of the tracks whipped them from the sight of the Lower Falls station.

The strong arms of Pleasant and Long Tom kept the hand-car rattling on at a good gait. Smoothly the wheels clicked along the rails, for still the long downgrade favored them.

They discussed the best possibilities, then, and among the rest, whether it would not be wisest to ditch the car and take to their heels across country. Long

Tom, however, advised that they continue up the railroad as far as conveniently possible, for the tracks leaned well to the north, now, and soon would edge along the tall mountains where they could find good and trusty friends.

BUT even Long Tom was a little uncertain. In all his deeds of daring the horse had been his means of approach and his means of escape. Cast now upon the resources of foot and hand power, he was a little bewildered, and although it was the coolness and surety of his advice which had carried them safely to this point, it was plain that he lacked any great self-confidence. That lack was reflected in the criticism which was beginning to arise. And Lefty was the leader of it.

Lefty's nerves was always of the hair-trigger variety. He could spend weeks in planning, studying, preparing for a great adventure, and he could strike brilliantly, swiftly, decisively. But afterward he could not sustain his morale. Now he curled up on the hand-car, shuddering. He insisted that they should take the car from the rails at once and take to the woods.

"And why, Lefty?" Long Tom asked gently. "What's the vital danger that we're in?"

"There could be a blockade of the rails," said Lefty.

"How could they get word ahead?"

"By telegraph, of course!"

"There's no station nearer than Wetherby."

"They got iron horses on this trail," said Joe Christy sullenly. "You might as well think about that, Chief!"

"There was no engine in the yards at Fisher Falls!"

"You're closin' your eyes!" shouted Lefty, his nerves mastering him in a leap.

"Steady—steady!" said Long Tom. "We need one head and one boss in this business, and I suppose that's my place. Lefty, keep still till I ask for advice, will you? They're not going to be able to chase us with an engine, and we'll run on the tracks close to the mountain."

Lefty was crushed to silence but as the hand-car reached a long shoot the fugitives heard a dull rumbling far behind them, then a blink of light.

"What's that, if you know it all?" shouted Lefty, pointing in a frenzy of fear and excitement. "If that ain't an engine coming, I'm a fool!"

They should have brought the car instantly to a stop and heaved it from the rails so that they could get into the woods without being noticed, but Long Tom was too stubborn to give the order at once and they remained under way until, with a roaring and singing like great strings under a resined bow, the engine came in full view around the next bend.

Now that the danger was so near, the crew of the hand-car fell to work instantly, stopped it, and heaved it from the track. It rolled down the bank, crashing among the brush, and the engine went by at the moment that the gang took shelter in the shadows. The screaming brakes halted the big machine a short distance away, and Pleasant, lingering a little behind the others, saw streams of armed men descend. Then he strode on in the direction of the crackling brush, far ahead.

He caught up with Long Tom and the others as they struggled up an ascent, the girl not much in the rear of the others, but as he came striding by her he called after the men ahead:

"Here's Sally pegging out. Are you going to let her go?"

"Every man for himself!" snarled Lefty. "Sally, if you have any sense, you give me your share to keep for you!"

Sally, breathing hard, said nothing, but worked steadily ahead, and Pleasant kept on beside her, beating back the brush to let her get through the thickets.

They got to the top of the ascent, and found themselves on a low hill from where they could look about over the moon-misted woodland. Behind them the noise had struck out as the hunters beat the forest.

They stopped to rest a moment, then rushed on.

Dawn was coming on when Long Tom finally called his band about him. Scouting well ahead he had found what promised to be a refuge.

On a sharp upslope behind a dense wall of brush, he had found the wide, shallow mouth of a cave. It was a damp, gloomy-looking hole, but they went in one by one and worked to either side. There was barely room for them to rest there in the dark.

Day was coming, and with it the

searchers pushed across the woods. They beat through the thicket in front of the cave, and finally someone dropped on his knees and peered into the shadows. He could have stretched out his hand and touched the motionless figures within, but he got up without a word and went on!

The morning sun rose high. They could hear the stamping of the searchers, still beating wearily back and forth. Then a new terror came to the quiet fugitives, for feet trampled on the ground above their little cave, and dirt fell on their backs. Presently they could hear the voices of two men, and one of them was Marshal Sam Lee.

THE marshal's companion was of the opinion that the fugitives had pressed straight on for the mountains, and in that direction he would throw the search parties. But Sam Lee pointed out that a swarm of searchers surely must be out by this time to block all escape in that direction. Their duty must be to make sure that Long Tom and his gang did not slip back down to the railroad.

He pointed out, moreover, that the band could not have gone far, because a woman had kept with them.

"And that," said the other, "I dunno that I understand—Long Tom Rizdal keeping a woman along like this! He's in love with her, maybe!"

"He'd cut her throat if he thought it would help them to get away," said Sam Lee. "It must be the other man—Holman, he calls himself."

"If you knew 'em so well," said the other, complaining, "why didn't you clamp down on them before they got into the bank?"

"I only guessed. I sent for pictures and things. I got them identified last evening. I was just a few hours too late." He sighed a little. Then his voice came more loudly. "There's a hole under this bank where a man or two could curl up!"

Lefty's hand closed convulsively upon the arm of Big Pleasant.

"Nothing in there," sang out the marshal's companion. "I got down on my knees and had a look at it, a few minutes ago."

Five hearts ceased thundering in the little cave!

"Well," said the marshal, "let's get on again and keep the boys busy. Mark me—the five of them are not far from this spot!"

And they heard him walking away with his companion through the brush.

The sun still had to reach noon of that dreary day and then go slowly, slowly down the western sky, but still the five dared not leave their hiding place for all day long the sound of the hunters beat up and down through the woods.

Darkness began to gather once more, but not until the blackness was complete would Long Tom crawl from the cave and allow his companions to do likewise. The decision of the leader was that they should hold straight across country, toward the mountains, as being the wall through which they could break with the greatest ease.

So they headed back toward the railroad, taking a slanting course down the bank of a winding creek. Before they had gone far, they heard a rooster crowing, and Lefty swore with vehemence that he would have that rooster to eat before the night was an hour older. Long Tom vainly protested. So the little column diverged to the right until they saw the glimmering lights of a farmhouse. Lefty disappeared with stealthy haste. The rest waited breathlessly. They heard a dog begin to bark violently.

A gun exploded—not with the clang of a rifle but the roar of a shotgun, hoarse and sharp—a barking noise.

Then silence.

And out of the darkness a stealthy, hurrying form came back to them—Lefty, carrying beneath his arm a fat rooster whose head had been wrung off. They found a close cluster of trees where they risked a small fire and in the flames the chicken, having been cut into pieces, was roasted at the end of wooden splinters. But Pleasant having cooked his portion with care, made only pretense of eating it, dropped back into the shadows, wrapped the meat in paper and put it away.

Lefty explained the noises which had been heard from the house. He had been rushed by a dog, but clubbed the brute over the head with a billet of wood, and gone on. But when he came to the entrance to the hen house, he had touched a wire with his foot. Instantly a shaft of light had come from the house and struck the hen house and he knew

he had walked into a trap.

Hunger, however, had made him desperate. A hasty reach got the rooster from the perch, and he was hurrying away when he saw the farmer, shotgun in hand, come storming from the rear of the house. He tried to skulk away, but his shadow, moving against the white chicken house, betrayed him, and a two-barreled charge of shot had rattled all about him but left him unhurt.

He was much cheered both by his exploit and by the food.

"Now admit that I was right, Tom!" he said. "Because you've been talking pretty hard to me, lately!"

There was no reply from Long Tom. They waited another quarter of an hour, but he did not come to them. This was his answer to insubordination. He had gone off to try for escape by himself. A loud howling of hounds broke through the trees then, and Lefty and Joe Christy leaped to their feet and dashed away. Sally would have followed them, but Pleasant held her back.

"They have put dogs on us!" she cried. "Jim, are you going to wait here to be pulled down?"

"Lefty and Joe are making trail," said Pleasant. "Maybe the dogs will take after them. At any rate, how long could you keep ahead of a pack, Sally?"

And he drew her back into the shadow of the trees.

They were barely out of sight when half a dozen bloodhounds, followed by a cluster of men, came through the trees. They picked up the trail of Lefty and Christy and plunged away.

VI

RAIN clouds had been piling in the sky. A volley crashed like musketry through the foliage, and other volleys followed, until the woodland was drowned in a roar of falling water. Even in the heaviest trees the girl and Pleasant were drenched instantly.

The ground turned to slippery mud; every hole was filled with water. The going became tremendously difficult. Every moment or two Jim had glanced back toward the girl, but as he paused for a breathing space, now, on the verge of a stream, she was no longer behind him.

He floundered back down the trail a few steps.

"Sally! Sally!" he boomed.

Seeing a dense thicket, he lurched into it and nearly stumbled over a soft form. He picked her up.

"Sally, what's wrong?" he asked. "Are you sick?"

"I can't keep up, Jim," she said. "Go on and save yourself."

He took off his coat, wrung it out, then wrapped her in it, in spite of her weakly protesting hands.

"I've let men lead me tonight," he said, "that had no more sense than a pack of jack-rabbits. Now I'm going to lead you—or carry you!"

He waited for a few moments longer, then he forced her to get up and go on with him to the edge of the water. He picked her up, lightly, and strode into the water. Midway, his feet sank into a sort of quicksand and the water rushed up more than waist high. He stood fast, struggling, then broke free and pushed on through the water to the shelving bank. There he put her down.

"Can you stand it a little longer?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Gimme your word of honor that you won't try to duck away from me on the trail?"

"I'll go on," said the girl in a broken voice. "I'll try to go on."

He started on through the woods, slipping and sliding, and wondering at the ease with which the girl kept beside him. But when they came to a stretch of fields with the blocky outline of a dark barn and house standing in the midst, she was staggering with fatigue.

Here must be their harborage for the night.

They found cattle on one side of the big barn, and horses on the other, and had she been in better condition, he would have insisted on saddling a pair of the mustangs and riding on with them toward the mountains. But she was far too spent, and he made her climb up the ladder to the loft.

There, in the pitchy darkness, in the warmth and sweetness of the newly mowed hay, sleep leaped in a be-numbing wave upon them.

He wakened suddenly and found himself in the warm hayloft with the warm mid-morning sun streaming through the cracks. Leaning above him in this golden-streaked gloom was Sally!

"I thought that you'd never wake up," she said.

"How did you do it?" asked he. "You look as fresh as a daisy."

"I combed out the seeds and the chaff from my hair. I always keep a comb with me, and you'd better use it, Jim."

He could only wonder at her. Sally, the blank-eyed drudge, was gone. It was not all in the way she had combed her hair, but there seemed a bloom upon her, even though her jacket and blouse and skirt were streaked and stained. A sort of light was breaking out from her as though her body were translucent, and her eyes were like a luminous mist.

He stood up and regarded her again.

"You look changed, Sally," he declared in all honesty. "And you look wonderful, too. You look as if—" He paused for a word, but he found none, only adding in some confusion: "As if you'd turned into another woman! But you got to have something to eat. I'm going to forage."

"There's no use," she answered. "There are two or three men working in the field near the house and the barn. You couldn't dare to go out. But we can saddle a couple of the horses in the stalls below us, and make a break for it. The foothills aren't half a mile away."

"We'll have breakfast before we start," said he. "You'll have it, I mean." He drew from his coat pocket the rather bedraggled bits of roast chicken: "It doesn't look good, Sally, but it'll give you strength."

She looked at the food in amazement, then broke into laughter.

"I might have known," said she. "This is like you! Try the other pocket, Jim!"

Astonished, he dipped into it, and brought out a parcel like his own. She, too, had saved her rations of the night before. And she had dropped them into his coat.

He handed the meat to her without a word and devoured his own share.

"We'd better be starting on," he said at last.

HE AND the girl climbed down the ladder, and while he was still a step or two from the ground he heard a quiet voice say:

"Just freeze right in that place, Mr. Holman, will you?"

He jerked his head around and saw the steady barrel of a rifle covering him!

Behind the rifle was a face like the face of a bull terrier—a long, down-bending nose, and a narrow forehead which hastily hid itself in short-cropped hair, and two eyes small and black, crowded close under the shadow of the nose. There was no touch of grayness about this man, and yet the ruddy, weathered skin made it understood he must be at least fifty.

He said in rather a sharp voice: "You put your hands over your head, Holman, and come down. The lady, she better stay where she is, up the ladder!"

Pleasant Jim put his hands above his head and climbed down to the ground, where he faced the farmer.

From the distance a woman's voice wailed: "Jo-el-l-l! Oh, Joel Peet!"

"Coming in a minute!" said the farmer, with a grin. And he added to Pleasant: "Here's four of you caught already! Lefty and Christy are in jail, now, at Fisher Falls, where you two will be before long."

"Hold on!" said Pleasant. "I've a bargain to make with you, Peet. Take me and the money that's on both of us and call it square. What good will it do you to put a girl in jail?"

"About ten thousand dollars. That's a sum I could use."

"Look here, Mr. Peet," said the girl, "suppose you turn us in and you get twenty thousand for the job. But suppose you don't turn us in, you'd have a hundred thousand, Mr. Peet. You'd be rich!"

"Thanks," said Peet, "but for a gent like me, twenty thousand is enough. More'n that would be enough to make my wife put on airs. Holman, how many guns you got on you?"

"If I had one," said Pleasant with apparent bitterness, "do you think that I would have held up my hands for any one man in the world?"

Peet looked into the blazing eyes of his captive and smiled broadly.

"I got no doubt that you mean what you say," said he. "How come you to be such a fool as to lose your guns?"

"I got a weakness for old things," said Pleasant. "And that gun-belt, I'd packed it ever since I was a kid. It was cracked and weak, and when I was hot-footing it through the woods it caught on the edge of a broken branch and ripped clean away."

Mr. Peet groaned. "Well, you got a second belt, I see. What's that for?"

"Money," said Pleasant Jim. "There's nearly a quarter of a million in it."

"Peel it off," said Peet huskily. "And you was gunna offer me a hundred thousand for a clean pair of heels, ma'am?" He grinned at the girl.

"You coward!" cried Sally. "You got a helpless unarmed man and you—"

"Shut your face, will you?" said the farmer. "You got some of the loot on you, too, I suppose?"

"Whether I have or not, you'll never get it."

"We'll see."

"Peet!" cried the girl suddenly. "Stick up your hands!"

The muzzle of the rifle jerked away from Pleasant toward the girl on the ladder. There was a bright glint of metal in her extended hand that well might have drawn a shot from him, but with a grunt he pulled his gun back to cover Pleasant Jim. And all in a second.

However, in a still smaller space, the hand of Pleasant Jim had leaped up under his coat and snatched out a revolver from a spring holster beneath his arm. Rifle and Colt exploded at the same instant, but the smaller gun spat fire first. A bullet hissed at the ear of Jim Pleasant, but there stood Joel Peet, his rifle fallen to the barn floor, and his bleeding right arm grasped by his left hand.

And he said, above the trampling of the frightened horses: "Thanks, Holman. You might have aimed for the heart."

"Stand where you are," said Pleasant. "Sally, keep him covered!"

She had sprung down from the ladder instantly and picked up the rifle, and Pleasant Jim turned to the horses. Any amateur could have selected the better pair. They stood side by side, a roan and a bay mustang, dancing and shaking their heads. Never was a pair more rapidly accoutered.

Footsteps and anxious voices approached the barn.

"Jo-ell!" screamed the woman, coming rapidly nearer.

"Tell her you're all right," commanded Sally. "Your gun went off by accident!"

"Mary, you fool!" shouted Joel Peet obediently. "Can't I take a shot at a rat without bringin' you running?"

"You come into the house right quick. I got something for you to do. And you boys"—apparently she was speaking to the laborers who had come running up after her—"get back to the fields."

THE footsteps retreated, and Pleasant Jim led the two horses toward the door. There he picked up and opened the money-belt.

"Here's five hundred dollars, Peet," said he. "I suppose that's the price of the pair—and the cost of healin' your arm?"

"Can you pull back the door for us?" asked Sally, as she and Pleasant mounted.

"Easy." Joel Peet nodded. "It's cost me a good deal to stay honest, but maybe it'll be worth the price."

Straight through the doorway they cantered, their heads high, alert for danger, but the two laborers already were deep in the field, at work, and Joel Peet's wife did not so much as turn her head on her way to the farmhouse. Presently a shroud of trees rolled a green cloud between them and that narrowest of escapes.

Pleasant drew the horses back to an easy gait. He turned to the girl, and she laughed back at him, an electric laugh of joyous excitement.

"What did you use for that bluff, Sally?"

"The comb," she answered.

"That trick might have brought a bullet through your head," he suggested gravely.

"But it didn't. It brought us three hundred thousand, and freedom."

"Until Sam Lee gets on our trail."

They headed for the Truman Denby farm, Denby being an old "lineman" of the Rizdal forces who had turned "straight" and thereby become a more efficient helper than if he had remained in active service as a rider.

The narrow trail jagged up and down through the wilderness, and gaining presently the grass lands and the stunted trees of the upper plateau. On the edge of the wall, they looked back into the valley and far off could see the town of Fisher Falls. A watcher posted at this place could have seen them far off and either waited to pick them off himself or else gone for help.

"And that's exactly what may have happened!" suggested Sally. "Suppose we pull well off the trail, here, and wait

in cover to see what may come!"

They turned the mustangs and wormed a tortuous way through the broken ground to the left. A knoll a mile away was the point of vantage for which they aimed, and as they came to it Pleasant dropped from his horse as if he had been struck by a bullet. Sally imitated that good example without need of a word being spoken. He pointed ahead with an eloquent gesture and, leaving her to hold the horses, crept through the rocks which fringed the top of the hill.

There he had a clear view of what had first alarmed him. In a pocket beneath the crest were half a dozen men and horses. Sam Lee was with them! The ubiquitous marshal sat on a rock and fanned himself with his hat while he smiled and chatted cheerfully, describing how word had come to him by telephone and then by messenger on horseback, telling what reason men had for thinking that the two fugitives had come this way. It was Mrs. Peet who had sent in the alarm.

"As sure as the devil, boys," the marshal was saying, "that fool of a Holman, as he calls himself, is trying to get free himself and take the woman with him! And if he can manage that, it will make us the laughing stock of the entire country. And remember—there's as big a reward for her as for him. Ten thousand apiece!"

It was a speech which made the blood curdle in Jim Pleasant's veins. He slipped back to the girl and, leading their horses, they worked their way through the rocks for another quarter of a mile before they ventured to take to saddle. Then they headed on for the farm of Truman Denby.

The twenty-five miles were not completed until dusk was beginning to settle over the range. Then they came in sight of Truman Denby's shanty ruling a little fertile hollow where the roughest of the mountain winds never would shake it too severely.

Sally and Pleasant, from a little knot of trees, observed the shanty anxiously. But it was a picture of peace and content. Truman Denby was chopping wood, and the powerful blows of his ax sent out ringing reports.

Halfway down the slope rode the two, then called and signaled. Denby instantly waved back a signal for them to approach and came to meet them.

"You busted through after all." He grinned. "And they all swore that you'd never have a chance."

"All swore it?" asked Sally sharply.

"Sam Lee and his crowd. They been here. They suspect me of bein' one of the underground. Come in. Sally, you rustle the grub. You'll find plenty in the shelf behind the stove. I'll fix your horses."

"And what else have you for this pair?" asked Sally.

"As soon as I get the harness off this pair, I'll ride down and bring in another couple."

HE WENT off with a reassuring wave of his hand. Sally, however, was moody as she went about the cookery. Pleasant helped her, carrying water, building up the fire.

"What's wrong, Sally?" he asked at length.

"I don't like Denby's caryings on," said she. "I know him like a book. He was one of the crowd three years ago. He's always been a gloomy devil. And now he meets us today and acts like a fox when it meets a goose. I think he has something up his sleeve!"

Big Jim Pleasant stared after Denby, as the man cantered across the tableland and disappeared through a gap between two hummocks.

"We've had our share of the bad luck," said Pleasant.

"That's what the boys say when they're bucking faro," said the girl. "But there's no mercy in cards, and there's no mercy in men. They're tigers, mostly, and Denby is one of the worst. Did you see the way he eyed your money-belt?"

"I saw," said Pleasant. "But why not? Every dog will eye a bone even if he doesn't mean to try to steal it!"

She was still gloomy as they sat down at the table. Pleasant ate with some difficulty, it appeared.

"You've lost your appetite, Jim!" she exclaimed. "Are you sick?"

"I am, kind of," said Pleasant.

"What's wrong?" she asked hoarsely. "Is it a touch of fever, Jim? Lemme have your wrist, and—"

"I dunno just what's wrong," he said. "I never had anything happen to me before, like this. My head spins, as though it was a sort of a top, y'understand?"

Pleasant threw back his head and struck the table so that there was a jangle of tinware.

"Sally," he said, "I ain't a fool and I'm not a coward, and I've never met man, woman or child that I couldn't look square in the eyes—but here I am starin' at the ceilin' instead of facing you!"

A heavy silence fell between them. Sally had commenced to frown, piercing him with her sharp watchfulness.

"I'm all shakes, Sally. I couldn't hold a gun steady enough to hit the side of that wall, just now! It feels sort of like something wrong with the stomach—sort of a hollowness."

"It'll pass," said Sally. "Worry, and having to drag a girl through what you dragged me, and no food, and the boys welching on you—that's enough to make you sick!"

He shook his head. "That's not it. Now that we're through the hole in the wall I wouldn't have any of the rest of 'em along with us—except the Leinster gray, of course. I'd give a pound of blood for him!"

"We're not through the hole in the wall," she assured him. "We won't be through till we're out of this shack with two good horses under us—and by the way, it's about time for Denby to be coming back with the pair he promised us."

Pleasant stood at the door.

"Not a trace of him anywhere."

"It's queer," said the girl.

She hurried from the house, and through the dimness of the mountain evening, she stared, but there was nothing before them. Then from behind the house, they heard the snort and stamping of a horse.

They started as though a gun had been leveled on them. Pleasant, grim of face, a Colt balanced in either hand, slipped around the rear of the house. There was nothing in sight. The empty horse shed was at their right. Behind the shack was the dense tangle of small trees.

"I'm going in there," said Pleasant Jim. "Stay here and—"

"I'll go where you go," she said staunchly. And she followed behind him as he glided through the darkness of the woods.

Not two minutes brought them to a small gap in the trees, and before them, hobbled short, and grazing on a scattering of bunch grass, were three horses, one of them a glimmering gray which seemed to show itself by its own light. Jim Pleasant groaned with joy:

"Sally, it's the Leinster gray!"

VII

SWIFTLY they cut the hobbles, while Sally, quivering with excitement, interpreted.

"I knew Denby was going crooked, and this proves it. Sam Lee got these horses from Charlie Rizdal. Perhaps Charlie's in jail now. Lee came up here and cached the horses with Denby and bought him to his side, in case we came this way. Quick, Jim! Get 'em to the horse shed and we'll saddle on 'em!"

Pleasant Jim said nothing. He was too busy urging the horses through the woods and back to the shed, where they threw their saddles on the backs of the horses. In the darkness, they led the three new mounts toward the door of the shed and heard what they dreaded—hoofbeats across the plateau, and then the cheerful voice of Denby from the distance:

"Here you are, Jim Pleasant!"

Out of the dusk they saw Denby coming, leading two horses. Pleasant stepped out from the horse shed, leaving the girl to hold the three thoroughbreds in the dark interior.

"Over here, Denby!" he called.

Denby swung to the ground. "Here's a tough pair of brutes, Pleasant. They'll take you through safely. Where's the girl?"

"Inside," said Pleasant, and pushed a gun into the stomach of his host. He reached for the buckle of the man's belt and, drawing it, allowed the belt and guns to fall to the ground.

"Are you crazy, Pleasant?" Denby asked. "What's wrong?"

"Sally!" called Pleasant. "Bring 'em out!"

Obediently Sally led the three fine horses from the shed. "Where'd you get 'em, Pleasant?" Denby exclaimed in amazement.

"You dunno where they come from?" muttered Pleasant savagely. "Sam Lee didn't cache 'em behind the trees, yonder, and bribe you to give him word if we came this way?"

"Pleasant," said the other, "so help me—"

"Shut up!" commanded Pleasant.

Denby mounted his horse again, and they turned toward the upper trail in haste, Sally in the rear, leading the spare horse. They had not gone a quarter of a mile when Denby broke his enforced silence.

"Pleasant," he said, "I wouldn't go this way, if I was you. I got an idea that trouble is waiting for you."

"You sent 'em up the trail, did you?" suggested Pleasant. "You didn't want the killing done in your own shack, I guess? Which way'll we go, then?"

"Back to the valley."

"We'll not go back to the valley. There's some trail ahead of us through the hills. Which is it?"

"There's only a small, rough one—a bad one for night travel."

"Lead us that way, and talk only when you have to!"

Truman Denby obeyed like a man whose head is in the lion's mouth, and soon brought them to an irregular cattle trail which wound up the side of a dome-shaped hill. At length the trail came on to a small road, along which they could travel with greater ease. Then Pleasant halted.

"Denby," he said, "I know the way, from here. Now tell me what reason there is why I should let you live?"

Denby was sullenly silent.

"There's no reason," declared Pleasant Jim.

But Sally exclaimed: "You won't do it, Jim!"

"He would have trapped us like rabbits," declared Pleasant Jim.

"Let him go home," said the girl earnestly.

"Go back, then," said Pleasant Jim. "But don't stay there, because when this here is known, I won't be the only man that'll come gunning for you."

Denby cautiously reined back his horse, turned suddenly and raced into the shelter of the brush. Pleasant turned with a sigh to the girl.

"He ought to be a dead man," said he. "But two things saved him. One was you, and one was the Leinster gray—I was so confoundedly glad to see him again!"

Sally said nothing, and slowly they went up the trail. They could manage a canter here and there, and at worst a trot. Twice lights gleamed before them, but they went on, for these were not proved places of refuge. A third time when they saw the distant glimmer of lights, they quickened their horses to a gallop. Both knew that this should prove a harborage, unless Sam Lee had been able to reach the underground even at such a distance as this.

They were too exhausted to use caution but rode straight up to the door. Pleasant leaned from saddle and beat against it with the butt of a Colt. It was opened at once by a man in shirtsleeves, and with a shotgun.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Who knows Long Tom Rizdal here?" Pleasant asked bluntly.

THE man stepped out into the night and peered up into the face of the rider. A smile on his lips.

"It's Pleasant!" he exclaimed. "And he broke through in spite of 'em! Hey, Maggie! It's Pleasant and the girl! Step down, folks—gimme your horses. Chuck, come grab these nags, will you? Doggone me, if I ain't glad to see you both, though I never expected you'd be able to come through!"

It was impossible to doubt his genuine good nature. If he had sold himself to the long riders of Tom Rizdal, he had sold only a portion of himself, and the rest remained bold and bluntly free. Maggie, herculean, red of face and hand, was none the less cheerfully excited, and all in a moment they were seated before food at a rough pine table. Slabs of ham, biscuits, and steaming black coffee made up the bill of fare, but never had they tasted a more delicious meal. . . .

Pleasant opened his eyes to find that a broad shaft of sunlight was striking in through the open doorway toward him, and in the shaft was the black silhouette of Long Tom, himself.

"Suppose it had been Sam Lee that walked through that door?" said the chief. "Where would you be, Pleasant?"

"I could have trusted to sort of smell Sam Lee if he came within a mile of me! Tom, how did you break through them?"

"Partly by luck and partly by nerve," said Long Tom. "When I saw that you wouldn't leave the girl, and that Lefty and Joe were making a snarling match of it, I knew it was better to split up. I headed for the railroad, grabbed a freight on the grade and mixed in with a fresh gang of possemen who'd come

down from Fisher Falls. They didn't recognize me in the night. I dropped off before we hit the next station and cut for the hills."

"What happened to Charlie?" Pleasant asked.

"He was waiting with horses on the edge of the town, but Sam Lee had a patrol watching. They discovered the bunch in the trees and opened fire. Charlie's horse was shot from under him. He managed to get an another, but the rest of the band was caught. Sam Lee appropriated the Leinster gray for himself and got to Denby's house. But you know that better than I do! All he got was two out of six, and one-quarter of the loot."

"They caught Joe with his share on him?"

"They did, and they found Lefty's where he'd stowed it in the pile of ties. More than two hundred thousand goes back to Fisher, after all!"

"And how does Fisher take on?"

"He went nearly mad. A run started on the bank, of course, but he paid everything on the nail, and take it all in all I think he's stronger than ever. Lefty broke down the minute he was caught. He named Jim Pleasant, so Holman is now out of the picture, and you can shave whenever you're ready. Now tell me about yourself."

"We had a couple of tight squeezes," said Pleasant, shrugging, "but Sally got us out of the worst one by using a metal-backed comb as though it were a gun. . . . Hey, Charlie!"

Charlie Rizdal had come into the room broadly smiling. Sally came down the stairs, her wrinkled clothes laid aside for a gingham dress borrowed from their hostess. Then there was breakfast, and such joyous gaiety filled the air that Pleasant Jim felt he was nearer to heaven than ever before in all his days. Finally he left the table and went outdoors.

The talk of three who remained inside turned upon Pleasant.

"You got him groggy," said Charlie Rizdal, with his broadest smile. "Have a cigarette and tell us about him."

"I've cut out smoking," said Sally. "He doesn't like it."

"You can duck it, if he comes back. You're not married to him."

"Married to him?" said Long Tom with a sudden sharp lift of his voice "Not quite, I guess!"

"But look here," went on Charlie, "you call Sally your girl and say you're going to marry her, and all that. But you let another man take the hard job of bringing her out of trinket, so to speak."

"What if I did?" said the big man angrily. "She's been caught before, hasn't she? And I've always got her out, haven't I?"

"Three times," said Sally, in a grave, emotionless voice.

"You've let her be nabbed three times," Charlie Rizdal said, "and three times she's had to live in jail and eat jail food. A fine life you've given her!"

Long Tom grew alarmed. "Does it look as if I've given you a hard row to hoe, old girl? It was your own choice. You remember three years ago, when I found you, I said, 'We'll settle down on what I can make doing some clerk's tin-horn job, or else we can fly wide and high and try for the big stake.' You made your choice then."

"Have I ever complained?" she asked steadily.

"No, not you. But from the way

[*Turn page*]

Charlie has been talking, I was almost afraid."

"When do we start?" asked Sally suddenly.

"Whenever you're ready."

"I'll go get on a hat."

SHE went hurriedly up the stairs. The two brothers looked after her, Long Tom frowning darkly.

"What made you start that line of talk?" he asked.

"Because I wanted to tip you off," said Charlie. "Pleasant Jim is mad about her, and he's done enough to make her think a good deal about him. He has a way of blinking when he looks at her, and she has a way of not looking at him at all. Well, Tom, they don't *hate* each other, I suppose, and if it's not hate, what is it?"

Long Tom reached out for his brother and caught his sleeve. He said in a low, troubled voice: "She's so out in the open and square that if she was thinking about turning me down, she'd tell me she wanted Pleasant more than she wanted me!"

"Would she?" sneered Charlie. "If she loved Pleasant, would she arrange for you to cut his throat?"

The last to be ready for the trail was Pleasant Jim.

They found him busily grooming the Leinster gray. And by the time the others were in the saddle, he was still arranging the padding blankets on the back of the big horse.

"Hurry up!" said Charlie Rizdal impatiently. "Anyway, you'll have to chuck him for a fresh pony at the end of the next march!"

But when he was ready to join them, he acted as though the stallion must carry him to the end of his journey, no matter how far. On sharp down-pitches he refused to risk the forelegs and shoulders of the fine fellow by going at any speed; and whereas the other three were willing to spur cruelly on the steepest upslope, Pleasant Jim would dismount and do the grade on foot.

But as the result of the careful manner in which he was rated through the day, in the evening the gray still carried on gaily, while the other three horses were hanging their heads.

"How does he manage it?" grumbled Long Tom.

"I'll tell you how it is," answered the girl. "He loves his horse, and love can manage miracles!"

Charlie Rizdal put in, with his ever-present, quiet malice: "That's how he was able to bring you through the lines of Sam Lee, maybe. What do you say, Sally?"

Sally said nothing, but Long Tom was irritated. "You talk like an absolute ass, Charlie."

However, the speech had sunk home, and as they went on toward the dusk of the day, urging the tired horses, he let big Jim Pleasant and Charlie take the lead, while he fell back with the girl.

"Sally!" he said.

"All right," said Sally. "Now let's have it all out."

"Have what out?" he asked.

"The thing that's bothering you."

He stared at her almost angrily. It was his pride that no one could read his state of mind.

"I don't know that anything's bothering me," he declared, steering his horse with a sort of absent-minded cunning down a twisted part of the cattle trail they were following.

"It's the Big Boy," replied the girl.

"Go on," said Rizdal. "Let's hear some more of what you think."

"All right. I'll tell you, but it comes awkwardly from me. You've noticed that Pleasant Jim is fond of me."

"A fool—a blind and deaf fool could guess that!" he said, fiercely. "Is that what's bothering me?"

"Partly that. Because you think I may be half as fond of him as he is of me."

"I don't worry about it," said Long Tom, at length. "I know you have too many brains to make a mistake like that. You know he's a good fellow. So do I. You know he's got sentimental, and made a hero of himself for your sake. But I don't think that you'd balance him against me and prefer him. Am I right?"

"It wouldn't be reasonable," she agreed, nodding.

"Has he been telling you how much he loves you?"

"No. I don't even think he knows he cares for me. He's simply like a colt with a touch of colic. He feels wrong in his stomach, so to speak."

"If you were another girl," said Rizdal, "I'd say your head could be turned by the strength and the courage of that

fellow. But you're the hardest-headed youngster that ever—"

"Cracked a bank," she suggested, without emotion.

"Well," said he, "you know black from white, and you can see this fellow's fit for nothing but to run a horse farm. Well, he's stepped over the deadline, and he'll never run a horse farm. He has to live as a crook, then. But you have too much sense to think he can make a success at that unless he follows the leader. Am I right?"

SHE looked at him thoughtfully.

"I think you are," she said.

"He isn't made of the same stuff that you and I are made of," went on the outlaw. "He's new in a new game. He'll learn to shoot straight, after they've put a few killings on his shoulders—things he wasn't within a thousand miles of—as they did with me. He won't care! However, you see the difference between him and me."

She answered instantly: "Yes, you could build an empire where he could hardly be more than—cowboy, say, to the royal herd. You have the brains, Tom. I've always known that."

"You say you know it," said he, pressing his horse a little closer. "And there was a time, Sally, three years ago, when you thought you cared a little about me. But now you've changed. You treat me as if I were a stranger!"

"Do you want me to hang on your neck?" she said. "If I did, it would be sending you off to be killed. If Pleasant Jim saw me so much as pat your hand, Tom, he'd kill you."

Long Tom swore softly. "No man—" he began with heat.

"Tush, Tommy," said the girl. "You're a grand fighting man. But you're just not like Pleasant Jim. He feeds on danger. And if ever he had what he felt to be a fair reason for killing a man, not you and not Charlie, nor hardly you and Charlie together could stop him."

Long Tom started to make a swift and bitter answer. But he checked himself, for he knew she was correct.

"Perhaps you're right," said he, his brow dark. "But Sally, your eye never softens when you look at me."

"Did I ever gush over you?" she asked.

"You have a sweet way of putting it," growled Rizdal.

"You found me starved and sick and done for," she said in explanation. "You gave me a chance to do something, to be a sort of power, to handle men, you know, and money. Well, I loved it. I've always loved it, and the danger and the excitement, as well. I'm a crook and I admit it. I said I would marry you some day. I suppose I shall. But don't ask me to fondle you. It isn't in me."

"There's no possibility of love being in you!" he exclaimed.

"Maybe there isn't," she answered with composure. "But if you ever find me a bad bargain, chuck me quick."

"You take what I said too hard, Sally," he replied. "Be reasonable! Of course I want you straight and clean. And if I've got to take the hardness with it—why, I'll do it. Besides, when we have a chance to make a home, Sally, I'll find ways to warm your heart!"

She did not avoid his glance, but looked fairly at him.

"And, Sally, when we settle down, it'll be a real place. The Riviera would about fit us. A swell villa in the hills."

She listened and sighed as the beauty of this proposed life grew before her mind's eye.

"But what about Pleasant?" he asked suddenly. "What are we going to do with him?"

She answered without the slightest hesitation: "I can't let him down, Tom. Not after what he's done. I'll have to try to break the news to him gently."

There was no sign of the pursuit of wise Sam Lee behind them all that day, but that did not mean that the veteran had decided to throw up the trail. It simply meant that he knew he had lost his first trick, and that he was determined to win the second.

Two tricks in such a game as Tom Rizdal played might come far apart, and therefore Sam Lee determined to act as though he had half the world and all of the future years in which to win his battle. He went back to Fisher Falls to discover, if he could, to what extent, if any, this had been an inside job.

When he rode into Fisher Falls, he was received in a manner which was a novelty for him. All his days he had been the warrior of the frontier, the unfailing destroyer of crime and criminals, but now he found men's eyes fixed coldly upon him, and he could hear their whispers behind his back.

It hurt him, of course, but it did not cause him to back water or to change his good resolutions. He went to the bank and saw Fisher.

The banker had turned from rusty gray to white. Hair and face were without color, but his eyes were shot with red, and his nostrils flared.

"Have you come back to ask me to thank you for your work?" said the banker. "You suspected them the day before the robbery, and you didn't act!"

"I did not," the marshal confessed.

"Have you got the brazen nerve to stand there and admit such a thing to me?" roared Fisher.

"I have to admit it when I make a mistake," said the little marshal.

"Mistake? Ruin! You could have killed half a dozen and done less harm than you've allowed to come to me and my bank!"

VIII

A CUB reporter of the *Evening Democrat* was sitting outside Fisher's office, hoping for an interview which for two days had been denied him. He heard this thundering voice as every one in the bank must hear it, and even those who passed in the street. He saw a headline forming in his mind, an article which would be copied by the biggest newspapers in the state. And he wrote shorthand like mad.

If the marshal, standing under that shower of verbal stones, saw headlines also, they were of a nature to scourge him like the fabled scorpion whips. But still he had not wince.

"I made a mistake," he repeated earnestly. "But I hoped to make a clean scoop and gather in more of the tribe. I didn't know that Long Tom Rizdal would be mixed up in the affair. If I had, I'd have armed every man in town and blocked every street before I went to break open that gun shop!"

"Second thoughts!" cried Fisher.

"I haven't done so badly," said the marshal. "At least I've handed back to you a quarter of the loot."

"Twenty-five per cent. I think you're actually proud of it!"

"I am proud of it," said Sam Lee. Though I should have caught all of them, with the possible exception of Tom Rizdal. Pleasant and the woman were in the hollow of my hand."

"Then why didn't you close your fingers and catch them?" shouted the banker.

"Because Pleasant performed a miracle."

"You dropped in to tell me how pleased you are with yourself, I see," said Fisher.

"No," said the marshal, "I dropped in to tell you that I'm going to keep after them. And the higher you boost the price for their capture, the bigger your opportunity of—"

"Of getting back the rest of the money?" exclaimed Fisher.

"No," said the marshal, "probably you'll never see another penny of it, unless we should catch a couple of them and let them ransom themselves." Sam Lee stood up. "You think about boosting the price. I have to go to find men."

"Find men?" cried the irate banker. "Ain't Fisher Falls full of men?"

"Of course it is," replied Marshal Sam Lee, "but when I said men, I meant *men*. Good-by!"

He left the bank, while Lewis Fisher sank back into his chair with a renewed interest in life. Even if he had to lose six hundred and odd thousand dollars he seemed to have an excellent chance, now, of getting some revenge.

It irritated him that Sam Lee had come through the interview with flying colors. Accordingly, when the editor of the *Evening Democrat* sent him a story purporting to describe the meeting of the marshal and the banker, and saying in a note that it made things rather hot for the marshal, Fisher simply scratched on the margin:

Okay. Give him the devil!

And so the story went to the printing press, and Fisher turned to consider a proposal for the sale of Jim Pleasant's farm and stock.

There were five hundred acres, nearly all land of the finest quality. They were close enough to the town and the ground rich enough to make a truck garden out of a part of the place. Indeed, Jim Pleasant already had started one. Then there were fine fields where grain crops could be rotated, and strips by the river where alfalfa grew like mad.

Money had been loaned upon that farm as upon mere grazing land and here was a purchaser who was willing to pay a hundred and fifty dollars an

acre for the ground alone. Add other assets, and the price offered for the Jim Pleasant place by this prospective purchaser was pushed up to close to a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars!

Spot cash, too! This was a millionaire from the East.

But the banker beat his fist upon his desk.

"If that little valley is worth a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to an Easterner, it's worth two hundred thousand to me. I'll make that land worth three hundred an acre, and I'll raise the cost of one of those Pleasant horses to a thousand dollars. . . ."

In the meantime, trouble was pouring upon the marshal. For when he wakened the next morning, he found that Fisher Falls was up in arms against him, and the reason was printed in headlines in the *Evening Democrat* of the preceding afternoon.

According to that stinging article, Sam Lee had declared that there were no men in Fisher Falls. And the story was not without withering reference to the marshal's recent failure.

On the editorial page the editor, with grinding teeth, had attempted to make cooler comment upon the marshal's lack of respect for the Fisher Falls population, and in his final paragraph announced that one no longer could expect real service from the marshal—the years were taking their toll not only of his body but of his brain, and it was high time that Washington should know the status of its representative in this section of the country.

SAM LEE read this as he consumed his breakfast. Others in the dining room looked askance at him and frowned darkly. However, no one spoke to him until a young man sauntered across the room and tucked his hat under his arm.

"Good morning, Marshal Lee," said he. "I come from the *Evening Democrat!*"

Sam Lee nodded cheerfully.

"Well, sir," said the youth, "the *Evening Democrat* doesn't want to stab anybody in the back without giving him a chance to hit back."

"Dear me," murmured Sam Lee. "Will you sit down? I'd call that a fair policy. Your paper would never hit without letting the other fellow hit back?"

"That's exactly it, sir. Our editor says—"

"I've seen your editor," said Sam Lee thoughtfully. "He has a scar under his right eye, I think?"

"Exactly! And—"

"Man with policies like that, he ought to be looked up to. For instance, he wouldn't print anything he wasn't sure was correct?"

The reporter started to answer, but observed that the marshal had been stirring his coffee with a spoon held in his left hand, and that he was now holding the cup in the same hand.

Sam Lee put down his cup. He was still smiling, gently, affably. But the young reporter had seen enough. The right hand of Sam Lee did not appear at all. He started to his feet.

"Hold on! You ain't going to run along, young man?"

"I—I just remembered something, Mr. Lee. I got to ask you one question. Did you mean what you said about there being no men in Fisher Falls?"

Said the marshal: "It's a statement I never made. But since it was made for me, perhaps it may as well stand. And if your editor wants fair play, tell him he may as well put into his paper today that I'm waiting around to see what Fisher Falls is going to do about what I'm supposed to have said!"

The reporter backed toward the door, but the clear voice of Sam Lee followed him: "You may as well say to your editor, too, that I'll drop right in on him and find out where he got his idea for that story!"

The reporter turned and fled, and Sam Lee mildly asked for another cup of coffee and sat for a long time over it, always stirring in the sugar with his left hand. The right was free and it was continually fumbling his cravat—a position which made it easy to get a revolver from a holster beneath the armpit!

Later he sat in the hotel at Fisher Falls and quietly bearded the entire body of that rough population, and enjoyed it.

He had sent out many telegrams and, after two days, he began to receive visitors at the hotel. Almost without exception they were slender men burned almost black, and with cheeks so hollow that it seemed that they had been seared by the fire in which they lived. They

were all as alike as so many wildcats. There were five of them and no one knew anything about them until the editor managed to get a glimpse of them.

It was difficult for him to get that glimpse because, shortly after the reporter returned from the hotel, the editor of the *Evening Democrat* had thrown himself upon his fastest horse and fled for his life.

He lived a skulking existence on the borders of Fisher Falls. Curiosity almost maddened him when he heard about Sam Lee's odd group of visitors, so he adventured into the city and from the roof of a house peered at the line of smokers. After he had looked at them for a long time, a pang seized the editor. His lips worked, he slipped away and rushed for his place of retirement.

There he sat down and began to write, merely pausing now and again to rummage through a well-sorted collection of photographs. Before he had finished he had poured out three thousand words about the men who had been sitting with the marshal on the veranda of the hotel. The fearless editor wrote:

Five slayers of men sitting in a row, with Marshal Sam Lee at their head. For what are they waiting? Gunmen, professional, cunning, dauntless, cruel as eagles and as sure of their prey, how has Sam Lee been enabled to gather them?

He answered his own questions with a good deal of acumen. The marshal, he wrote, had brought them together for the sake of capturing or killing the great Tom Rizdal and his famous partner, Pleasant Jim.

That story was instantly believed, and people began to hold their breaths. Then, one day, six magnificent horses were brought before the hotel, and the little marshal and his five terrible companions mounted and rode out of Fisher Falls. They were armed to the teeth, with rifles, revolvers, and long, cruel knives, and the packs behind their saddles were significantly small. It was plain that they meant to live on the country, like Indians.

It did not occur to people to doubt that they would win their victory, even with Long Tom Rizdal and Pleasant Jim against them.

LEWIS FISHER stood at the window of his bank and seemed to drink in the air of a cruel satisfaction.

There was a stir beside him.

"Uncle Lewis, I'd like to be riding with them!"

"Don't be a young fool," said the uncle. "Lee would laugh himself almost to death if he was to hear you say that!"

"I'd like to try!"

"You're trying to throw a bluff and impress me," said Lewis Fisher. "Go back to your desk! Or else live up to your talk, get on a horse, and ask Marshal Lee to take you along!"

This disgusted speech was hurled fairly in the face of the nephew. He was a pale and hollow-chested young man who was not very industrious and not overly intelligent, but for the banker he had one overwhelming recommendation. He possessed the final family name of Fisher!

As Fisher Senior delivered this volley to put his heir in his proper place, he strode on past. Five minutes later, young Lewis Fisher had jumped into a saddle and was riding furiously out of town. A slowly moving wisp of dust hung in the air, as he passed through an avenue of trees. A little further and he saw the six riders winding up a hill.

He plunged for them and came at once to Sam Lee.

"How are you, Fisher?" said the marshal. "Any trouble back there in the town that brought you out here?"

"There's trouble that bothers me," replied the boy. "Marshal Lee, I got to make a name for myself! The old man thinks I'm a worm. I'll show him that I'm not!"

The marshal waited, attentive.

"I want to go with you!" said the boy huskily. "Will you let me?"

Sam Lee shook his head. "I got enough," he said. "These are all handpicked. Besides, I ain't hunting black bears."

"I know it! Marshal, give me a chance and I'll play my hand as well as the next one."

"Can you shoot, Fisher?" asked Sam Lee.

"I can, and I will," said Lewis Fisher the Second.

"There's a tree, and there's a blaze on the side of that branch," said Marshal Lee. "Just blaze away."

"Thanks," said the boy, and instantly whipped out a Colt and fired.

It was a thin little branch with a white notch in it, and the bullet passed cleanly through the mark.

"All right," said the marshal rather drily, "and if you want to go along with us, you're welcome, son. What about your uncle, though? What will he have to say?"

"He'll have to say," declared the boy, "that I have something better to do than to waste my time in a bank. Lee, I'm the happiest man in the world!"

The marshal smiled. "Just watch every day on this trail, because if you don't, you might change from the happiest man in the world into the deadest!"

THERE were three great matters for Jim Pleasant. One was how he was to return to a peaceful life to raise horses; the second and most important concerned his emotions concerning Sally, which he felt would wear away were he once back at his familiar tasks; the third had to do with danger from the long arm of the law, and to this he paid the least attention, because he trusted himself, and he trusted his companions.

They were domiciled in a small mountain shack, waiting for the dust of their latest exploit to settle. The farmer and the farmer's wife and son were cooking for them, waiting on them. Life should have been easy enough had not discontent continually stirred in the breast of Pleasant Jim.

He was up early and he was awake late. He found on the place half a dozen unbroken mustangs and it was his diversion for a while to handle them. But they were intelligent enough to understand when they had met a master, and after a few sessions with them, he could not raise an interesting session with them.

Gradually ennui began to settle upon him and he concentrated upon Sally.

Sally had changed a great deal. She was more reserved, and there was about her smile and her voice something out of a new world. Pleasant Jim sensed it. But he could not tell whether she actually had altered or whether he was beginning to know her better.

In his present humor, however, all his senses were sharpened, and two things he clearly made out: the first was that she really liked to be with him, and the second was that she was filled with terror every instant she was in his company.

Pleasant Jim was aware that the other two men felt he was paying too much attention to the girl. It made Charlie restless, and Long Tom's brow often was clouded. But as for the opinion of anyone in the world, Pleasant had not the slightest care.

He was explained to himself by sheerest chance. They started for a ride in the early morning, the two of them, and as he helped the girl up into the saddle, her horse moved and she slipped back into his arms. He held Sally close to him and kissed her twice upon the lips before she thrust herself away from him.

He came after her, acutely aware of his great discovery.

"Sally, I want you!" said he. "That's what's wrong. I love you, Sally!"

"Don't come near me—don't touch me!" she stammered.

"I won't poison you!" said Pleasant, frowning. "And if you take it that way, I won't trouble you none. Sally, you just despise me, don't you!"

"Of course I don't despise you. Only, there's danger. Jim, do have sense. Don't come an inch nearer!"

She was whiter than ever, but she began to laugh, and the laughter was a sadly staggering sound.

"What's wrong, Sally?" said he.

"Will you let me get on my horse—and not come any nearer?"

"Will you tell me then?"

"Yes!"

She mounted, but once in the saddle she fled across the valley and into the trees on the farther side.

The big stallion was mounted at one bound by Pleasant, and went like an arrow in pursuit.

Through the trees he sped and, in a clearing beyond, the iron hand of Pleasant caught the reins of the bay and brought it to a halt.

"Sally!" cried Jim Pleasant. "What's wrong? Am I poison to you, maybe?"

She stared at him with a desperate appeal in her eyes.

"I'm afraid!" stammered Sally. "Jim, you see, I'm going to marry Long Tom!"

She had spoken much as though he had drawn a gun, and the effect upon Pleasant Jim was almost as decisive.

"You're going to marry Long Tom!" he muttered. "Well, I been a fool and a swine. But I didn't guess you loved Long Tom."

"I didn't say I love—" she began, then

checked herself. "I mean, it's all right. Only—you understand."

"I don't understand nothing," he assured her. "Why didn't you blat out the minute I touched you, 'I belong to Tom Rizdal'? That would of stopped me, and you ought to of known it. And then you turn around and tell me you're going to marry him, but you don't love him. Sally, what hold has he got on you?"

Sally looked at him as at one who cannot be persuaded.

"I can't explain anything. Only—you never must touch me again. Will you promise that?"

"Right quick I'll promise it," said he, sourly. "I don't force myself on nobody, I hope!"

And he rode suddenly through the brush and back towards the house.

IX

IN THE evening Pleasant was asked by Long Tom and Charlie to play a hand of poker, but he rose and strode silently from the house.

"What's happened to the Big Boy?" asked Charlie Rizdal.

"Why ask me?" said Sally. "I can't read his mind!"

And she slammed out of the room and went to bed.

Long Tom continued to shuffle the cards. "Something has to happen," he said at length. "Speaking personal."

"Not to Pleasant?" asked Charlie Rizdal.

"That'd hurt you a lot, wouldn't it?" exclaimed Long Tom.

"His killing would be worth about a quarter of a million," responded Charlie, full of thought.

"Sometimes I think that you got the soul of a rat, Charlie!" breathed Long Tom.

"You're fond of him," said Charlie, with cunning malice. "But I guess that you ain't as fond of him as Sally is!"

Long Tom answered nothing, but began to deal.

He could have made an excellent living as a gambler if he had not gone in for a greater game.

"There's only one way out of this for us, Tom," said Charlie.

"Charlie," said his older brother, "I'm mighty fond of you. But you live small; you think small. The girl likes Jim. She ought to. He was a man when they were adrift together."

"Maybe," said Charlie. "But you got to see that perhaps she didn't tell you everything. Pleasant ain't a saint!"

Long Tom instinctively reached for a gun.

"You're a poisonous devil, Charlie," he said, at length. "Hating him the way you do, it's a wonder to me you can keep on smiling at him every day!"

"I'm waiting," said Charlie Rizdal. "I don't commit suicide, that's all."

"But he's got to die, so far as you're concerned?"

"Sure he does, and so far as you're concerned, too."

Suddenly Long Tom crossed the room and struck on the door of the girl.

"Come here a minute, Sally," he called.

She came to the door and stood in the dim light of the room.

"What's happened between you and the Big Boy?"

"I had to tell him that I—belong—to—you!"

She closed the door softly. Long Tom remained before it as though he were about to call to her once more, but thinking better of that, he turned and went back with his noiseless step to the table, and sat down.

"Well?" said Charlie.

Long Tom cast him a withering glance.

"You're right," he said at length. "Something's got to be done." He went from the room into the night.

Charlie remained alone, smiling a little with a foxlike content.

"It seemed to be about my turn to take a little hand in the game," he told himself.

Long Tom, striding through the dark, was confronted suddenly by a form as tall as and a little more powerful than his own.

"Well, Jim," said he, "you're in the dumps tonight. Still thinking about the farm?"

"I'm thinking about the girl," said Pleasant, speaking instantly from his heart. "How come you're to have her, Tom, when she don't love you?"

"Did she tell you that?" Long Tom asked, finally.

"No, I guessed it," said Pleasant.

"You think you know her, but wait a while and you'll see there's more to her

than you guess," suggested the bandit. "But now, I've got an idea. If I send you to Kentucky, I know where you can pick up and start again, Jim. You can have your horse farm, and I'll steer you to it. You want the details?"

"Horse farm?" said Pleasant. "I pretty near forgot that there was such a thing in the world. What's important to me—well, it ain't horses!"

"What is it?" asked Rizdal.

"Excitement is what we live for," said Jim Pleasant. "And I want my share. I'm going to stick with you fellows, Tom."

"Ah?" said Long Tom. "I understand. You want to see a few more banks crack open. Well, you'll have it your own way. Of course I've wanted you with us permanent, right from the first. Are you going back to the house? I'm walking on for a while!"

Pleasant went back to the house. He felt that he had come out fairly well from his talk with Long Tom. At least he had brought their relations out into the open.

In his room at the shack, he saw that Charlie Rizdal already was in bed and breathing regularly, so he turned in at once. For a moment he stared at the darkness, then sleep closed over his brain and his eyes closed.

THE moment his breathing changed, there was a rustle in the window, and at that instant his scattered consciousness returned to him. He was wide awake, every sense on the alert and the gun which never left him, day or night, was gripped in his hand.

Trifle by trifle he turned his head until he saw the dim silhouette of a man's head and shoulders against the stars beyond the window, and the glitter of steel in his hand.

He snatched his own gun and fired. The answering shot boomed heavily and the slug tore at the wall beside him.

He was out of the bed with a bound, but the window was empty, and when he reached it, he had only a fleeting impression of someone running around the corner of the house. Pleasant Jim slipped through the window and dropped like a cat to the ground, gun in hand, and sprang in pursuit.

"Who fired that shot!" shouted the familiar voice of Long Tom, and as Pleasant turned the corner of the shack, he encountered Tom running from the door of the house.

He thrust the muzzle of his Colt into the stomach of Tom Rizdal.

"Rizdal," he said savagely, "you tried that on me yourself."

"You're a fool, Jim," said Tom without excitement. "Look at my guns. Have either of 'em had a shot fired out of 'em?"

"Then where's the man?" asked Pleasant.

"Yonder!" said Tom Rizdal, and nodded.

Across the valley swept a horseman at full gallop, heading away as fast as his mount could leg it.

"You're right," said Jim Pleasant, "and I'm a worse fool than you said. Excuse me, Tom."

"Forget it," replied the gunman. "What's happened?"

"Someone took a shot at me while I was in bed. But I spied him, and beat him to it by a shade."

"Did you nick him?"

"I dunno. It was a snap shot."

The sharp voice of Sally came from her room:

"Jim Pleasant! Where are you?"

"Here!"

"You're not hurt, Jim?"

"Me? Not a bit. What made you think I might be?"

"I heard the noise in your room . . . What happened?"

"I dunno," said Pleasant Jim, "except that somebody may of spotted us and come down here to clean up a big reward. But as soon as there was a little gun talk, he changed his mind."

"It was that sneak of a boy, Pete!" said Sally, speaking of the farmer's son.

"There's Pete now," answered Pleasant. "And him that tried this snap shot at me was twice bigger in the shoulders than Pete. Besides, he cut away across the valley."

"What'll we do?" asked Charlie Rizdal, hurrying down the stairs. "How'll we get Emmet for this?"

"Emmet?" cried Sally. "Do you mean Dick Emmet?"

"That's who I mean. What'll we do? Trail him?"

"We'll go to bed and get our sleep out," said Pleasant Jim, and went up the stairs.

The others followed him with their eyes, and when he had disappeared, they

presently heard the creak of the bed as he threw himself on it.

"He—he liked it!" said Sally.

"Sure," answered Charlie Rizdal. "That's just a nightcap, sort of, for Pleasant!"

"Are you going to bed, Sally?"

"Yes. Good night."

She disappeared, and the Rizdals stepped out into the darkness.

"Did you see what he did?" asked Tom Rizdal.

"Aw, I was only faking sleep. I had an idea something would happen tonight."

"I thought I had him," said Tom. "And he twitched a gun over his head before I could wink."

"He's a snake," said Charlie Rizdal. "Of course he was faking, too."

"Naturally. He suspected something."

"How did you have the nerve to meet him when he came down?"

"I ran out the door asking who'd fired the shot. He came around the corner on the jump and shoved a gun into my stomach before I could draw. He accused me. I think he would have killed me, but then I saw somebody streaking down the valley. That lucky chance saved my life!"

"How did you ever come to think of such a thing?" said Charlie. "It's not your style."

"Anything's my style. Fair and free fighting, if that will serve. If not, then anything to get the wrong man out of the way."

"What did you do with the gun?" asked Charlie.

"Chucked it into the brush. I was carrying three guns instead of two. Now, let's go to bed. . . ."

OF COURSE there was much talk during the next day about the strange happenings of the previous evening, and all joined in with conjectures and surmises.

Long Tom, finding himself beneath a scrub-oak with Sally near by brooding over a book, said:

"You haven't turned a page in half an hour, Sally. What are you doing?"

"Standing at the window with the head-hunter," said Sally slowly, without lifting her eyes. "If I'd wanted to kill only one man, I'd have done just that —stood at the window and taken a careful shot, but if I'd been out for a big handsome reward, I should have slipped softly in through the window and tried to bag two men!"

Long Tom nodded. "But the scoundrel didn't have the nerve. He was a coward."

"No real coward," replied the girl, "stalks a house where Long Tom and Jim Pleasant are living. There's something odd about this whole affair!"

"What do you make out of it, then?"

She raised her head. "Tom, if anything should happen to Pleasant Jim I think you and I would have to say good-by!"

He glared down at her.

"Are you tying me up with that bit of dirty work that was tried last night?" he asked.

"I'm not going to talk to Jim," said the girl. "I'm just telling you. . . ."

Up through the mountains, softly and steadily, never rushing their horses, went the procession led by Sam Lee, Federal Marshal. All along the line of march he was constantly receiving reports from people who rode suddenly into the camp or came up with them.

No one was disturbed when a rough mountaineer rode up to them just as they were scattering for an evening halt and gave a letter to the marshal. It ran:

My dear Sam Lee,

If you can't have all of the men you want to get, at least you ought to be glad enough to get one of the three.

They have heard how you're passing through the mountains, and they feel you can do them and yourself a good turn by showing up at the Newberg shack just after sunset Thursday night.

The two Rizdals will be out of the way, and young Pleasant will be there alone.

There was no signature.

The marshal studied it for a long time, by the last of the daylight and then by the fire. In his pocket he had letters and other documents wrapped in oiled silk, and he began to compare these with the letter.

When he had finished, which meant the free use of a magnifying glass from time to time, he took out his writing materials and wrote a letter. Finished, he called young Lew Fisher to one side.

"Lew," said he, "I'm gunna give you a real trial. I want you to take this letter and ride on ahead through the mountains to King's Gap and through the gap and on to the lower plateau beyond. There you'll come to a fork in the trail. Be sure to take the left fork. Follow on until you've reached a narrow

valley, and in the center of the broadest part, with a spottings of brush and trees all around it, you'll find a shack called the Newberg shack. Now, son, I want you to get close to that shack, find young Jim Pleasant and pass that letter into his hand, without getting a bullet passed into your body first. You understand?"

The boy listened with a gray face.

"I understand," he said with stiff lips.

The marshal studied him intently.

"You're scared," he said frankly, "but that sort of a scare doesn't paralyze a man, and I think that you're going to do pretty well, Lew. You like that black mare I've been riding, don't you?"

"She's the finest thing I've ever seen in horseflesh."

"Well, she'll run true and straight till she drops, and she'll never let you down on a hard trail. She's your horse! Now saddle up and go as fast as you can!"

Lew Fisher did exactly as he had been told to do.

It was a hard and a lonely expedition. Never before had he been alone among the dusty gray faces of the mountains. But somehow he kept going. Eventually he crossed the pass and took the left work at the trail, then he entered the dangerous ravine.

Suddenly he saw a tall man riding a great gray horse—and young Fisher snatched his rifle from its long scabbard beneath his leg and covered the stranger.

Right into the sights rode the big fellow and the great gray. Now the man alone was in the sights, and now his head—

A DEAD bead! What held him back was not altogether shame to take advantage of an unsuspecting man, and neither was it altogether the behest of the marshal. It was rather a sense that Fate had brought him purposely to Jim Pleasant.

Still drawing his bead, he called: "Pleasant!"

Jim Pleasant stopped his horse with a jerk of the reins.

Lew Fisher lowered his rifle regretfully. "I had you, Pleasant!" he exclaimed.

"You had me, kid. I must have been riding blind."

The voice was so gentle, so manly, that it touched the best and most hidden chords in Lew Fisher's breast.

"Why didn't you shoot, stranger?" said Pleasant.

"Man, with you having no warning at all?"

"Maybe you're right," said Pleasant. "But not many would have stopped to think of that. I want to know your name."

How tall, how magnificent, how free he seemed. A shadow of awe for the first time in his life fell upon the heart of Lew Fisher.

"My name is Lew Fisher," he said, hardly finding his voice.

"You?" cried the other heartily. "You the nephew of Lewis Fisher? Well, I'm glad to know you!"

Much was implied in that statement. Lew could feel it. How dearly he wished that his self-satisfied uncle could have been at hand to hear that voice speaking!

"I brought a letter for you from the marshal," said Lew Fisher. "Here it is."

He handed it over, and Pleasant remarked as he took it: "This here is neighborly of the marshal. Instead of sending men to shoot me, he sends men with letters." And he added rather warmly: "Tell the marshal, no matter what's in this letter, no matter whatever comes out of this man-hunt, that I wasn't trying to push any of the queer! I did a job for Long Tom. But it was only carrying a message and the pay I got for it was counterfeit. All right, and while I'm in prison waiting a trial, I lose my farm." He set his teeth hard. "You can ask your uncle, Lew, how I happened to lose my farm! And after that I had to go wrong because there was no chance for me to go right! Say that to the marshal, will you?"

"I'll say that," replied Fisher. "But about you and your farm and my uncle —what's that?"

"I don't accuse no man behind his back," said Pleasant. "But you ask him, will you?"

They said good-by, for it obviously was not healthy soil for young Fisher to linger on. Away he rode down the narrow canyon, and big Jim Pleasant opened the letter.

Dear Pleasant,

This is to let you know that I've just had a letter from someone printed large and rough, but I think that the hand that printed it belonged to Tom Rizdal. The letter tells me that on Thursday night I'll have a chance to find you alone in

the house of Newberg. Because he and his brother will be away from the place.

Well, Pleasant, it's my job to get you if I can, and I'm surely going to try hard, but on the other hand I don't want to cut a man's throat in the dark. Take a look around you and see how you stand with the fellows who are calling themselves your friends. For my part, I hate a traitor worse than I do the devil.

Yours with as much friendship as the law allows,

SAM LEE

Jim read this twice, then dismounted in haste and touched a match to it. It was reduced to a wisp of gray ash which rose like a bird and dissolved in the wind.

The marshal had not asserted, definitely, that the hand which had offered to betray Pleasant was that of Tom Rizdal. He merely had thought so, though Pleasant shrewdly suspected that the "thought" of the marshal was apt to be more accurate than the "certainty" of most men.

The heart of Pleasant grew hot with a sort of stern gratitude. There was young Fisher, too, who had carried the letter and had had him helpless under the sights of his rifle. Well, that act was almost enough to wipe out his sense of grudge concerning the uncle.

X

NEXT day was Thursday. More than twenty-four hours remained during which Jim Pleasant could discover whether or not Long Tom Rizdal actually was false to him. Cheered by that reflection, determined to key himself to the highest point, and make every shadow tell, he came in view of the Newberg house, and there was Sally walking moodily beside the creek.

"Sally," he said, without dismounting, "if you'll do me a mighty big favor, tell me how wrapped up you are in Tom Rizdal? Suppose I heard that Rizdal was sick—could I hope that maybe supposing he should not get better, you'd be willing to look at me, afterwards?"

"Jim," said she, "are you asking me what I'd think if you were to shoot Tom?"

It fairly made him blink, that direct accusation.

"All right," said he, "I'm not talking killing, but if you're going to take it that way—"

He rode on, and knew that she was looking after him.

She was like the others. At least, he could never quite understand her. Sally was different from other women, almost as Tom Rizdal was different from other men.

He could not get her under the full finger of his comprehension.

Doubly troubled and embittered, he put the Leinster gray in the corral, and went slowly back toward the house.

The door was open, the wind had fallen to the softest breeze, so while still at a distance he could hear the voices inside.

Charlie Rizdal was saying: "I'll roll you for the guns, then!"

"Take you!" answered Long Tom.

Even the clinking of the dice were audible.

"They're yours," said Charlie Rizdal, with an oath.

"It ain't the gun that makes the dead shot—it's the talent, Charlie," said the older brother. "You wouldn't inherit his shooting even if you had his guns to work with!"

"Well, maybe not."

It suddenly occurred to Pleasant Jim that this conversation had to do with him. They were shaking dice for the guns of a superior marksman—well, how many men in the world shot straighter than the Rizdals?

There was one he could think of, and that was himself!

"We've shaken for the other stuff," said Charlie. "Now how about the horse?"

"You might as well shake for his boots!" "He ain't dead yet, you know!"

Teeth set, Jim Pleasant felt that he was close to words which would betray the facts to him at last. He waited, his heart beating fast.

"I say, for the horse now. We'd fight about the gray afterwards!"

The gray!

"Shake them up, then."

"There's only a pair of fives, Tom, but watch 'em grow!"

"Shake again."

"There you are. Beat three fives, old son."

"Easy! Here you are at one roll! A full house will about be enough. Here it is—four fours. I'll ride the Leinster gray after all!"

There was all the proof that big Jim Pleasant could ask for. Certainly they considered him no better than a dead

man, for already they were gambling for his guns and his horse.

He went to the door of the house and looked in on them. Long Tom suddenly sat erect, then Charlie looked askance and started violently.

"Hello, Jim," said he. "I thought you were hunting today?"

"I am," said Pleasant grimly, and walked across the room.

He felt the alarmed glances of the robbers crossing like swords behind his back as he went through the hall door and up the stairs to his room. There he made his pack quickly.

He had barely finished it when he glanced out of the window. From the barn he saw Sally galloping off on her long-legged bay, and there was something that made him certain that she would not come back at once.

He threw his pack across his shoulders and hurried down the steps, but halfway to the bottom, his brain cleared. If he came down into that room again, what would the two brothers do? They had made up their minds to compass his death, and no doubt they would achieve their end if they could.

He might go back to his room, but if he did they were sure to suspect something and be on the watch for his descent through the window.

He went on. As he came to the little hall at the foot of the steps, he saw that the door to the room was a trifle ajar. Was he being spied upon?

He unslung his pack and hurled it with all his might; it dashed the door open and flew on into the room. All Jim Pleasant's questions were answered instantly by the crash of two guns.

He pitched to his face at the verge of the door, a revolver in either hand, and he could see the two—Charlie near the kitchen door, a repeating rifle in his hands; Long Tom by the table, his feet spread a little and his head thrown back, like a true fighting man enjoying a battle.

PLEASANT tried two snap shots in rapid succession. The first hit Charlie in the chest and he dropped the rifle and began to sink to the floor. The second was aimed well enough, but it found the edge of the table and plowed a furrow straight across its top.

Long Tom, like a duelist of an older day, standing straight, Colt extended stiffly, was dropping bullet after bullet. His first was aimed too high, for a man lying on a floor presents an awkward target. His second clipped through the long hair on the back of Pleasant's head.

He leaped to the side and shot again, but his own movement disturbed his aim. The third shot from Jim Pleasant toppled him to the floor.

Still he was not done, for as Pleasant scrambled to his feet, Long Tom spun himself over like a cat at play and caught up a revolver for a final shot.

Once more Pleasant fired, reluctantly, for this man was already down. He saw Tom Rizdal's head jerk back as though struck heavily by a fist, and then the notorious outlaw lay still. He would never rise again!

Charlie was groaning by the kitchen door, crawling slowly toward it.

"Don't kill me, Jim!" he moaned. "I'm a skunk. I know it. But I'm gunna die anyway!"

"Lie down and stretch out," said Pleasant Jim. "I'm not going to kill you, though you know what you deserve. Lemme have a look at you!"

He slashed open the coat and shirt. It was a small purple-rimmed hole oozing blood and well down below the heart. Pleasant Jim stepped into the kitchen and found the three members of the family cowering. He told them to go into the other room and take care of a badly hurt man. Then, stooping and fumbling in the coat pocket of the wounded man, Pleasant pulled out a wallet, fat and hard with treasure. Charlie Rizdal acknowledged the transfer with a ghastly smile.

"It'll do me no good where I'm going," said he. "Ride hard, Pleasant, and I wish you luck. You been squarer to me than I've deserved."

Upon the table, Pleasant counted out two thousand dollars.

"I'm leaving," he said to the busy family. "And here's two thousand. One thousand for you for taking care of Rizdal. The second thousand is for Charlie if he gets well enough to ride, ever."

He stepped to Long Tom and from his pockets took the two big shares which the chief had apportioned to himself. Then he picked up his pack and waved good-by from the door. . . .

He had no sense of victory or of elation. For the treasure which was now in his hands he had no more regard than for a handful of dead leaves. Over eight

hundred thousand dollars had been taken from the bank and divided among six persons. Of the six, two were in prison. Two lay dead, or dying, stripped of their loot. Another was a woman. And she never would forgive him for the slaying of Long Tom.

No, Sally was taken out of his life forever!

Utter loneliness came to Pleasant Jim then as he worked his way up a narrow ravine and listened to the distant, booming voice of a waterfall. All had been stripped from him in these last few months. He had given up his farm and the horses whose blood was almost as dear to him as his own. He had given up the friendship of all law-abiding men and women. And, above all, he had given up Sally.

For all that he had sacrificed, he had gained what? Money, money, money! Of six, four were gone to death or prison or long sickness. A girl was wandering through the hills. And now what would he do?

Well, he could ride on until dusk, then camp and shoot a supper for himself and cook it. Each day must be sufficient unto itself.

For a week he rode steadily, taking fine care of the Leinster gray, which stood up like iron under the punishing journey. All that time he saw no human face, and so at last found himself again on the edge of the lofty tableland overlooking Fisher Valley.

Danger had become a small thing to him. He had turned hard. From the bright steel of this new nature of his, the face of peril seemed to slip away. It had no cutting edge against him. Only two days before he had wound through the Cameron Pass despite guards set to catch him. Men talked much of this and of his other deeds, but there was no past, no future to him. There was only the dreadful sense of loss.

But, as he sat on the edge of a rock that hung above the valley wall, with his cigarette, he heard a slight sound as of a cracked twig underfoot, in the brush behind him. He went on calmly smoking, with his head apparently directed down toward the valley lights, but turned enough to scan the brush wall behind him, from the tail of his eye.

Presently he saw the tops of the bush bending, slowly. He jerked off his boots and in his stockinged feet slipped back to the edge of the brush and waited. The faintest of rustlings came to him. Then he hurled himself forward. One crash drove him through the bushes.

A GUN flashed and roared in his face, then the weight of his shoulder struck down the stalker and stretched him on the ground.

Pleasant whirled like a tiger, found the hands of his victim, dragged him out into the open.

"You head-hunter!" said he. "I'm gonna pitch you over the cliff here and let your bones rot underneath!"

A choking voice answered him: "Do and be hanged! I got no luck, or else you got ears a hundred feet away from you!"

"Hello!" said Pleasant. He brought his face close to the face of his prisoner. "Fisher!" he exclaimed.

"It's me," said Lew Fisher bitterly. "A little luck and I'd have turned you into pulp. Go on and finish me, now."

"Where's Sam Lee?" Pleasant asked harshly.

"None of your business."

Jim Pleasant whistled. "All right! Don't lose your shirt about it. But you're game, kid."

"D'you think so?" said the boy, eagerly.

"I know it. Fisher, I got to polish you off, because I'm afraid to leave you loose on my trail. Sam Lee and the rest—let them go. But you—you've trailed me down twice. The third time it would be me that was done for!"

"I think it would!"

"Tell me what I can do for you, and what sort of a message you want to send to your uncle."

"Aw, let the old boy rot, and I don't care about women. I ain't that kind. Only, Pleasant, would you do one thing for me?"

"Sure I would."

"Now look here. Me being dead, it wouldn't hurt you none to do it. But write down and mail to some newspaper that you was afraid of me—just like you said to me—not of Sam Lee and the rest, but only of me."

"I'll do it."

"Will you? That'll show people I was something more than a bank clerk and the nephew of crooked Lewis Fisher."

"Crooked?"

"Sure. A snake has got a bigger soul than him!"

"You wouldn't run the bank the way he does, maybe?"

"No, I wouldn't! . . . But what are you doing? You don't have to tie my hands. I'll take the jump myself and never yip."

But Pleasant Jim secured his hands firmly, then searched him and removed a small armory of weapons.

"Where's your horse?" he asked.

"Back of the hummock, there."

"You like horses, son?"

"What fool doesn't? Except Uncle Lewis! He likes nothing but cash."

"Son," said Pleasant, "turn around and start for your horse."

The boy turned, swallowing his wonder, and they went slowly back around the edge of the brush. A soft whistle brought the Leinster gray glimmering toward them.

"They'll never catch you—not with your ears and that horse," said the boy.

Behind the hummock they came to the waiting pony, and Pleasant helped the lad to mount.

"You left Sam Lee and came on by yourself?"

"Yes. Why should I split up a little reputation with six others?"

"Besides, you were able to find me once."

"Yes, and I found you again—except that you found me first!" He swore softly. "I should have tried the long-range shot, but in the half light I wasn't sure of myself." He paused, then asked, "Now what?"

Pleasant had swung into the saddle. He looked at Fisher. "Suppose that I don't kill you, Lew?"

"What d'you mean by that?" asked the boy in a sharp, ugly voice.

"Why, kid, I never shot a man in cold blood in my life!" He added savagely: "No matter what Charlie Rizdal said!"

"Aw, Charlie's a hound dog," said the boy with unutterable scorn. "Sam Lee says so. Sam ain't on your trail any longer, you know!"

"The devil he isn't!"

"No, he says the main part of his work you've already done for him. The killing of Tom Rizdal, I mean."

SO a new idea was presented to Pleasant Jim, and one which he did not greatly relish. Lew Fisher developed the theme as he rode down the trail, his hands tied in front of him, but free enough to use the reins.

"It was a great stroke the old marshal put in," said Lew. "Sending you word that would get you into trouble with the Rizdals. What good was the catching of Tom? He'd been caught before but never held. Now he's dead, and that's different. Then there's Charlie. Well, Charlie is caught and it'll be queer if he ever gets away again. They've got enough against him to hang him ten times over."

All that night they worked down from the plateau into Fisher Valley. By morning they were well up toward town. There Pleasant made camp, tying himself to the youngster, though Lew Fisher said, with his chuckle: "What's the good, Jim? Am I gunna be crazy enough to tackle you with my bare hands?"

However, Pleasant Jim took no chances. A forlorn hope was forming in his mind and he meant to stake everything upon a strange cast of the dice.

Before dusk, hungry and tired, he was on the way again with Lew Fisher, pressing recklessly ahead, risking much.

"Where are you going, Jim?"

"Some place you've been before. Wait and see."

They cast a slight circle around the town and in the dusk were above Fisher Falls and close to the residence of Lewis Fisher.

Pleasant dismounted and brought the horses into a thick grove and secured them there. He found an easily climbed section of wall, went up himself, and helped Lew Fisher after him and headed for the distant house.

"You know, Pleasant," said the boy cheerfully, "that I could let out a yell and have half a hundred people swarming on top of you in no time?"

"You know, son," answered Pleasant with equal good nature, "that I could send a bullet into you or cut your throat before the help came?"

"You wouldn't do it," said the boy with confidence. "Sam Lee said that you'd never kill unless you were driven into a corner!"

"Sam hates my heart," answered Pleasant bitterly. "It was Sam Lee that dragged me into perdition."

They crossed an open meadow and were passing through a grove of trembling poplars and went on under the

very shadow of the house.

At last they could see Fisher on the side veranda and the red round point of light which was his cigar. He was calling servants from his house, one at a time, and dressing them down severely.

"He's sore as a goat!" whispered young Lew. "There's poor Johnson. He'll catch it worse than all the rest."

Johnson was the secretary-clerk-stenographer who worked like a slave for the banker and, like a slave, he was lashed by the words of the elder Fisher now—until a sudden change came in the voice of the banker.

"Johnson," he said, "What's the news about the boy?"

"There's no news except bad news. The marshal has come in, and your nephew is not with him!"

"What report did Sam Lee send?" asked Fisher in a shaken voice.

"He sent word that your nephew went off by himself and swore he never would come back unless he brought Jim Pleasant with him."

"The fool!" shouted Fisher, senior. "He wants to make the world think that he's a hero, and he's only a baby—a rabbit! And yet—" He checked himself again. "Johnson," he said, "the lad *is* a hero. And I never have appreciated him! Go downtown, make the telegraph hum."

XI

JOHNSON hastily retreated, and young Lew touched the arm of his companion in the darkness.

"That beats me," said he. "Maybe he's fond of me, and not just using me because he hasn't any other heir!"

"Keep before me," said Pleasant, as they stood up. "Walk up to the veranda and warn him in a quiet voice that he mustn't shout or do anything to attract attention."

They approached the veranda.

"Uncle Lewis," said the warning voice of his nephew, "don't make a noise."

"Great glory!" breathed the man of money. "Are you there, Lew?"

"Softer!" said Lew Fisher. "I'm here, but I'm a prisoner."

"To whom?"

"To Jim Pleasant."

They had come up quite close, and as Lewis Fisher heard the name he cried out in a stifled voice and stumbled back.

"Keep close and keep still," said Jim Pleasant. "I haven't come here to shoot you."

The alarm of the older man for himself was instantly swallowed in concern for his nephew.

"You've been hurt, lad!" murmured Fisher. "Otherwise, how could he ever have taken you?"

"He took me the way a tiger takes a goat—with his hands. He's brought me here and he wants to talk to you."

Fisher spread out his legs. Instantly he was the business man striking a bargain.

"Leave the boy here with me, unharmed in any particular," said he, "and I'll guarantee not to turn in alarm on you. If not, the alarm goes out and the place will be surrounded and you will be—"

"Fisher, I walked through a Fisher Falls alarm one night. Now I have a horse to get through it. Besides, you don't understand. I'm not in your net. You're in mine. I have you covered."

The banker said quickly: "What is your point of view?"

"That I have the drop on you."

"I suppose that you have, owing to the idiocy of my nephew in letting himself be captured."

"Friend," said Pleasant coldly, "there have been some rough men on my trail lately, as you know. But there's never a one of them that gave me as much worry as your nephew."

"Is it true?" cried Fisher Senior, in delight. "Lew, I'm proud of you. There's been a great deal about you I never understood."

"There's a great deal of you," replied Pleasant, "that your nephew never knew. I'm going to tell him now. Lew, listen to how I went bad. I was working to clear away a mortgage on my farm. I nearly had turned the trick by working like a dog, and even by getting blood money from the law. Then I met Long Tom and he offered me a thousand for what looked like an easy thing to do. I did the job. I sent in the thousand to the bank, and your uncle found out that the money was counterfeit. Right there he decided that here was his chance to get the farm for next to nothing."

"You lie!" panted Lewis Fisher.

"Wait a minute," said Jim Pleasant. "I was jailed for passing counterfeit. While I was in jail your uncle foreclosed

on me, and he scared out the other bidders at the auction so that he got everything on the place for twenty-five hundred. And there you are! I was cleaned out of my life's work. What I did then was to break jail, and the next thing I did was to crack a bank. It was Lewis Fisher's bank. I felt that that sort of squared things. Now I'm being hounded, and some day I'll have to start killing to avoid being killed. Part of the fault is mine. I never should have taken a job from an outlaw like Long Tom. But who put the slide under me and shot me down into perdition? Why, your uncle, there!"

"Uncle Lewis," said the boy in a fury of disgust and scorn, "he's told the truth!"

"You impertinent young scoundrel!" cried the banker. "Are you daring to dispute what I—"

"Quit it," said the boy curtly. "I'm not what I used to be, and I don't swallow that sort of talk from you any longer."

LEWIS FISHER was silent, amazed and bewildered.

"Are you daring to throw away—" he began.

"Uncle Lewis, what am I throwing away? The life of a bat for the life of a man! I've talked pretty hard to you. Confound it, Uncle Lewis, I mean to talk better than that. You've been mighty kind to me in a million ways. I'd like to be your nephew and your friend, but I'm never again going to be your slave!"

"So that's the end of years of nurture and care and forethought for your sake, young man?" Fisher asked savagely.

"Or maybe it's the beginning," broke in Jim Pleasant. "D'you want a softhead or a man to take your place when you die? Now we'll get down to *my* business. Fisher, you can tell me what stands between me and a chance to get back inside the law?"

The banker seemed to take enjoyment in this sudden turn.

"What keeps you outside the law? Only a few little things. You've passed counterfeit money and you've broken jail. You've taken a million dollars from my bank. Beyond this, you've done little things such as shooting men in the act of enforcing the law against you."

"Very well," said Pleasant. "I've got three big counts against me. Start with the last first. It wasn't a million."

"It was nearly nine hundred thousand."

"You got a quarter of that back."

"A third of it," said the banker.

"How is that?"

"You don't know the story of the satchel of money left on my doorstep?"

"Sally!" cried Jim Pleasant suddenly. "She's turned in her share!"

"An admirable young woman—if it was she," said the banker. "And if you could let her know, I'd arrange to have all danger of arrest removed from her. Sam Lee says that it can be done."

"You're still out five-eighths of the money you lost. Suppose that I lay down that money—more than half a million—here on the veranda at your feet? What would you pay for that?"

"I'd have the indictment quashed! I'd arrange everything! As for the passing of a thousand dollars counterfeit—Sam Lee is a sensible man. Pleasant, do you mean what you say?"

"I mean that I'll come back," said Jim Pleasant, "if I can step in right where I stepped out. I stepped out from a farm stocked with fine horseflesh. I want that farm back and all the horses!"

Lewis Fisher groaned. That little farm had become the apple of his eye.

"A business transaction—" he began.

"I'm offering you half a million," said Pleasant."

"Of my own money!"

"For a thing you stole."

"I'll see you hanged first, Pleasant! It—it's not business!"

"Then good-by."

He turned briskly away, taking young Fisher by the arm.

"Hold on," said the banker. "Do you take Lew with you?"

"D'you think I'll take to the trail and leave this young bloodhound to follow me again?"

"Pay the money and set Lew free," said Fisher suddenly. "I'll give you what you want."

"What's your security?" asked his nephew curiously.

"You are," replied the outlaw. "If he breaks his words to me, he'll be less than a cur in your eyes, and he knows it. Besides, if he doublecrosses me, I'll kill him if I die trying!"

The banker was breathing hard.

"I'll leave the money with you," said Pleasant. "I'll leave your nephew with

you, too. If everything can't be arranged the way I want—all the lawdogs called off and the farm given back to me—I expect that half million to come back. Is that straight?"

Lewis Fisher groaned.

"That's straight!" said he.

"You're a witness, Lew?" asked the outlaw.

"I'm a witness to every word, Jim."

"Good night."

"How'll we keep in touch with you?"

"If you want me, send Lew up the valley to the Three Sisters. He can send a smoke signal by day or a fire signal by night."

He turned from them, found the Leinster gray, and rode off through the night. . . .

THE reaction of the banker was instant.

"Now I've got the cash, where's Sam Lee to throw this scoundrel into prison?"

"Send for him," said young Lew. "I'll ride to the Three Sisters and warn poor Pleasant."

"You're out of your wits!"

"Or else send for Sam Lee," said the boy firmly, "and ask him how we can save Pleasant from jail."

His uncle listened in the deepest amazement, but suddenly nodded.

"Get Sam Lee!"

They got the marshal. He came to the banker cheerfully.

"I want to talk about Jim Pleasant," said Fisher.

"Everybody does," answered Sam, with a grin.

"Look at this!"

"More bank loot," said the marshal.

"All that I've lost now," said Lewis Fisher, "is a good deal of sleep, and a paltry few thousands that was spent along the way. Marshal, this money is left with me in trust. If Pleasant can be kept out of jail, it's mine. If not, it has to go back to him."

"Did Pleasant dare to ride down to Fisher Falls again?" murmured the marshal, a glint of fire in his eyes. "That man has nerve!"

"He brought my nephew," said the banker. "Lew was head-hunting. Pleasant caught him and brought him down, and turned him over to me along with the money. What do you say, Lee?"

Sam Lee shook his head. "I've never heard of a neater bank robbery than this," he said. "They got away with the bigger part of a million, and most of them broke through my hands. Well—what happens? They all go crash, except two. Somewhere there's the girl. And somewhere there's Jim Pleasant. But all of the money comes back to Mr. Lewis Fisher. How do you make that out, sir?"

"Who killed the Rizdals?" asked Fisher.

"Pleasant," said the marshal. "He's done more work for me than my whole posse of hand-picked gun-fighters! But as long as Jim Pleasant is free to get away with this job, I'm done for."

"Listen to me," said Fisher. "I'd be glad enough if you could rake in Pleasant and put him behind steel bars he couldn't cut through. But, my friend, you'll never catch Jim Pleasant without causing a lot of brave men to die. He's proved what he can do in a pinch!"

"Let him prove it again," said the marshal savagely.

He hurried away from the house, with the banker vainly following and protesting that this decision was costing him half a million.

With a sort of guilty haste Sam Lee mounted his horse and rushed back to the town and to his own little private office.

There he sat down, his jaw set and his eyes keen, like one about to fight a battle.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" said the marshal.

"I'll talk to you through the door," said the voice of a girl.

"What have you got to say?" said the marshal.

But as he spoke, he glided softly forward, then seized the handle of the door with a tremendous wrench to tear it open.

He almost broke his wrists, but he did not budge the door.

"I knew you'd try that," said the girl's voice, without triumph. "So I tied the door. I can watch you through a crack, Sam Lee, and if you try to slip around outside your office, I'll just climb on my horse and be off before you can possibly get a shot at me."

"I don't shoot at women," said the marshal, a little in anger.

"Maybe you don't," said the girl. "But I haven't come here to talk about wom-

en. I've come to talk about Jim Pleasant."

"Has the whole world gone loco about that man?" groaned the marshal. "What about him?"

"I want to know what you'll take to let Pleasant go free."

"I wouldn't take ten billion dollars!"

"Because men would say you'd failed?"

"Yes."

"You're honest. But suppose that we arrange a little exchange. In his place I'll give you a much worse criminal than Jim Pleasant."

"Who might the criminal be, that's done more than Jim Pleasant?" said the marshal. "Will you tell me that?"

"I have," said the girl.

"You'd give yourself up for the sake of Pleasant?" said the marshal.

"Yes."

"And who are you?"

"I'm Sally."

MARSHAL LEE clung to the door for a moment, bewildered.

"Untie the door," he said at last. "I give you my word I'll not try to make an arrest. I want to talk this over."

A slash of a knife, the door sagged open, and Sally stood before him, her pretty face shadowed by a sombrero.

"Nothing but nerve!" said the marshal, inviting her toward a chair. "You've rode right in, and nobody recognized you! Well, Sally, you want to give yourself up for Pleasant Jim?"

"Yes."

"He'd never let a woman pay that price for him."

"He doesn't care," said the girl bitterly. "All that he cares about are horses."

"You want me to make Jim Pleasant a free man," said the marshal. "It might be done by getting a pardon from the Governor. But it would have to be an equal value in exchange. What have you done, Sally?"

"I'll tell you a few of the main things," said the girl. "I did the inside work in the Ponting robbery. I brought the Cushing emeralds through without customs. I—"

"You did the Cushing job! And they always thought it was the old man—"

"I used him for a sort of a blind and he didn't know he was being used. I got to Duncan and Leicester the tools they used when they broke jail."

"How did you manage that?"

"I'll write it all out. I'll confess all of those things, Marshal Lee. And a lot more. But will I do to take the place of Jim Pleasant?"

"Sally, will you sit down here and write that confession?"

"I will."

"There's a fountain pen. There's a stack of paper. And you can have all the time in the world!"

"First—would I do to take the place of Jim Pleasant?"

"Sally," said the marshal, "the brutal truth is that Fisher has withdrawn his complaint, and the worst that stands against him is an accusation of passing counterfeit. And we all know he never dreamed it was counterfeit! Write the confession, Sally!"

Sally sat down to write. . . .

A smoke signal brought big Jim Pleasant to the rock of the Three Sisters, where he found young Lew Fisher awaiting for him.

"It's all fixed," reported Lew. "All you got to do is to ride up the valley to your farm. That's all. You'll find the same two Mexicans there that was running the place before."

"No, I won't," said Pleasant Jim, with a grin. "One is south of the Rio, already. But on the level, Lew, is it all fixed?"

"It's all fixed," said Lew Fisher. "You might as well ride right on down through Fisher Falls, and stop off at the marshal's office. He wants to see you to arrange a couple of things."

They hardly had entered Fisher Falls when he was recognized by the silver beauty of the Leinster gray and the grand manner of that noble horse.

Small boys closed around them. They were in danger of trampling the fearless youngsters under foot, and then men and women came out.

They passed the imposing front of the bank, and the door opened and there was Fisher, the president, standing with the broadest of smiles and with extended hand.

Pleasant Jim waved to him but did not pause.

"I'd rather shake hands with the devil," he said bitterly to Lew.

They rode on to the office of the marshal.

He stood at the door of his office and

waved the others back. Only Pleasant Jim advanced to meet him, and they shook hands formally.

"I suppose that I ought to say I'm glad to see you back," drawled Sam Lee. "Anyway, Pleasant, you've been bought and paid for, and you're free."

"Bought and paid for?" repeated Pleasant sternly. "What you mean by that?"

"The law can't give something for nothing," said the marshal. "So it gives up you and it takes the girl, instead. She's written out a full confession."

He opened the door of his office.

Pleasant, springing in, saw Sally's pale face on the farther side of the room, where she was pressed into a corner.

"Sam Lee, you traitor!" she cried. "You swore you wouldn't tell!"

"She come down here to sort of hear you and see you," said Sam Lee. "She wanted to enjoy the sight of magnificent Jim Pleasant ridin' in to the freedom she'd paid for with the rest of her life in jail. So she swore me not to show her to you. But I thought maybe you was man enough to sort of want to have a look at her."

"Get out of the room!" said Pleasant Jim, and he swept the marshal back toward the door and advanced upon the girl.

"The Governor sent this," said the marshal. "Maybe you'd better see it."

He slammed the door heavily behind him as he went out.

"That means something!" said Sally. And she darted forward and picked up the yellow form.

It was a long message, addressed to Marshal Sam Lee. It read:

USE YOUR OWN DISCRETION. BUT IF THE GIRL IS WILLING TO SACRIFICE HERSELF FOR THE MAN AND THE MAN IS WHAT YOU SAY ABOUT HIM I PROPOSE TO PARDON THEM BOTH IF THEY WILL PROMISE YOU PERSONALLY TO BE GOOD HEREAFTER. LET ME KNOW DATE OF MARRIAGE.

Half a dozen times their blurred eyes strained through that message, Sally in the arms of Jim Pleasant, holding the paper in shaking hands.

"Call Sam," said Pleasant in a choked voice, at last. "Call Sam Lee, God bless him! I want to promise to be good!"

How the Town Got Its Name

BACK in 1871 a group of spirited pioneers out of Kentucky and Illinois halted their wagons at a likely site in eastern Iowa, and decided to build themselves a community. No one bothered about a name. It was simply the town, their town. Farms came into being in the vicinity and in the town itself rose stores, a church, a jail of sorts, a little school house, a town house, a restaurant, and something that passed as a hotel.

A few years later the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad decided to extend its line and the route it chose ran right alongside of the town. There was even talk of the possibility of a station.

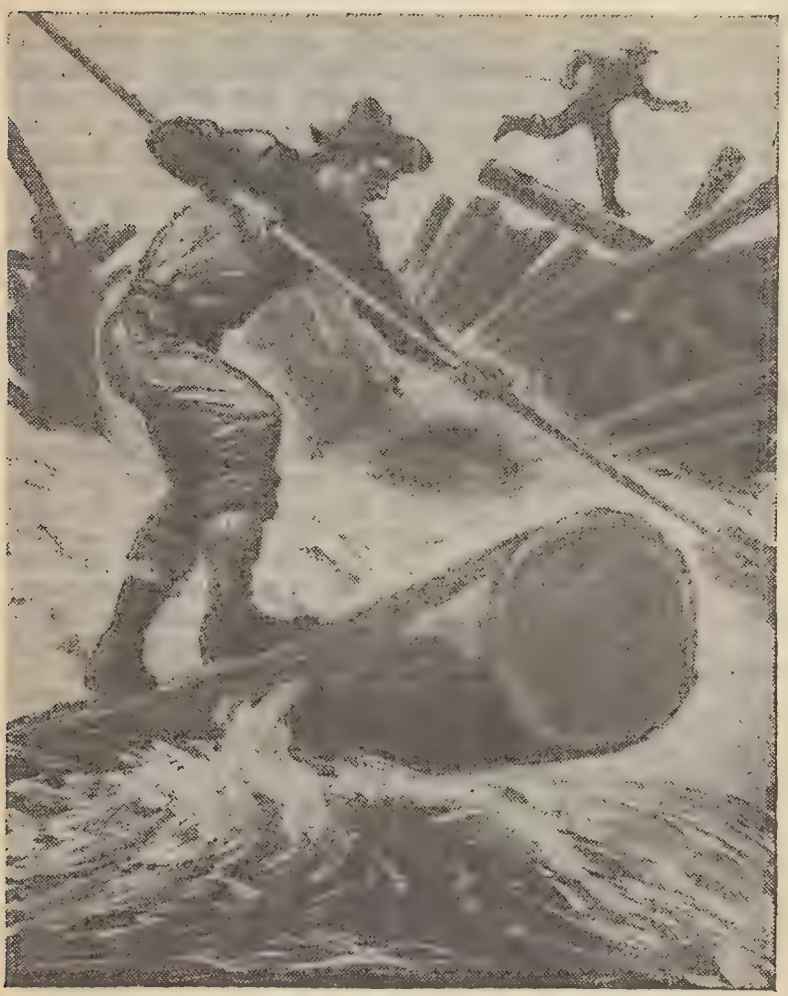
"It's time we had a name," folks were beginning to say. Suggestions were numerous and for the most part colorful, but no agreement could be reached.

"Look at that," said a townsman to several friends one day, pointing to the pile of steel rails piled man-high at the edge of town, awaiting the construction crew. Each rail was prominently stamped with the place of its manufacture, Low Moor, England.

"Yeah," said another. "Let's call it Low Moor," he boomed with sudden enthusiasm. "Sure," added a third, "then no one can say anyone's idea was thrown out to favor another man's. Let it be Low Moor." And it still is.

—*Simpson M. Ritter*

the Wood in Silver



The true story of how men's greed for ore stimulated the California and Nevada lumbering industry!

by HARRY VAN DEMARK

A LANDMARK on the Overland-Emigrant stage route where the dusty trail touched the banks of the Carson River, just three and one-half miles north of the present location of Carson City, Nevada, was Dutch Nick's.

Although it was later surveyed as a townsite and officially named Empire City, it continued to bear the name Dutch Nick's in honor of the original owner, Nicholas Ambrosia, who recorded his claim to the property in 1855.

With the rise of the Comstock Lode, and the building of the Virginia & Truckee Railway, Dutch Nick's became one of the most important settlements

along the east fork of the Carson. Here it was that the Mexican, Morgan and Brunswick mills flourished. They ground out rich ores under the pressure of water power supplied by the Carson River as it raced through a high-walled canyon.

But milling was a minor activity at Empire compared with the logging industry. The river made a sweeping curve at Dutch Nick's, basking lazily in the flatland sun before plunging the mad rapids of Brunswick Canyon. The quiet water provided a perfect setting for log booms, especially after the completion of the railway, because here the huge timbers could be guided shoreward and loaded into waiting flat-cars to supply the ever-increasing timber and fuel demands of the roaring Comstock.

Pine was cut in the Sierra Nevadas above Alpine in California, near the headwaters of the Carson, and rafted for eighty miles along the sometimes turbulent stream to Dutch Nick's, depot of the wood business.

The rafting was a source of never-ending amazement in the desert country as millions of board feet of pine, spruce and cedar rolled and bobbled along the river for forty days on the journey from the Carson head waters to Dutch Nick's.

In 1850, fifty thousand cords of wood reached the log booms at Empire and the major portion of it eventually reached the Comstock for timbering the deep mines. Lumbermen, like miners, enjoyed the end of the ride at Dutch Nick's and the station became widely known, retaining the name of its owner long after it was officially named Empire City.

Today it is hard to imagine that the river was once alive with logging activity. The Carson is hardly more than a trickle during the hot months, yet many of the buildings of the Comstock and even of Carson City itself were constructed from the timber that found its way down the river from Alpine to Dutch Nick's.

Improvements Introduced

At a later date, improvements were introduced into the logging industry as the demand for lumber became more and more insistent from Nevada mines and industries.

Fantastic wealth, spewing forth in a continuous stream of silver from the Comstock Lode, created many industries that were to thrive long after the deep mines were boarded up. Others lived a short, full life, riding the white metal crest and then disappearing almost as suddenly as they sprang to life.

Most fabulous of these was lumbering! The hydra-headed Comstock had an insatiable appetite for timber—a craving which eventually consumed nearly 73,000,000 feet of lumber each year, while necessary adjuncts to the business of mining gulped up another quarter-million cords of wood annually.

The logging operations at Dutch Nick's were only a beginning. Lumber hunger developed so rapidly that it could not be denied. As men burrowed into the steaming depths of Sun Mountain, they were closely followed by sturdy timber sets to form a giant maze of underpinning for the thin earth crust above.

Men's greed for silver was surpassed only by the mines' propensity for lumber. From Virginia City down through Gold Canyon and clear to the Carson River was another sprawling "above-ground empire" of mills and hoists craving cordwood to fire its boilers and treat the cold blue ore. Such was the demand that the eastern Sierra slope soon became denuded of stately pine, and even the roots were torn up and used for charcoal to feed the furnaces.

The V-Flume

To J. W. Haines of Genoa goes the credit for developing what was then an engineering marvel, designed to supply timber quickly and efficiently. His invention was the V-flume, a sectional wooden trough, manufactured from two-inch planking with each section so carefully fitted that there were no apparent breaks in the entire length.

The flumes followed natural grades, crossing canyons on overhead trestles, winding in gradual curves from the summits to the valleys below. Through these flumes flowed a turbulent stream of water, capable of carrying sixteen-inch square timbers up to thirty feet in length from fifteen to sixty miles an hour.

At flume's end, Washoe and Eagle valleys, the timbers were shunted into

stacking yards to await rail transportation over the Virginia & Truckee Railway to Virginia City. Ten flume companies, operating in 1880, maintained eighty miles of flume.

The entire Lake Tahoe region became a logging camp as far as the eye could see. French Canadians, Italians and Chinese were employed as woodchoppers in the forests. The rough timber was snaked to the lake or hauled by oxen-powered wagons.

There it was rafted to such mill points as Glenbrook where it was sawed into planks, scantling, boards and square timbers, then transported to the summit and dumped in the V-flume trough for a swift white spray ride to the valleys below, eventually to be buried in the caverns, stopes and drifts of Sun Mountain that men might mine more silver.

By the time the mines played out the logging industry was finding it difficult to find enough timber to supply even the lessening demands.

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the DARK

A Rangeland Novel

I

AS IT'S said about a person being born with a silver spoon in the mouth, so was Colonel, a little thoroughbred colt. There was of course no silver spoon, but half a dozen attendants was on hand to greet him. The colt was helped up and steadied alongside his mother for his first nursing.

Soon the raw spring winds warmed to the sun and the grass near popped out of the steaming earth. Then one bright sunny day, Colonel, the thoroughbred of thoroughbreds, hugging his mother's side, went with her to a pasture to be turned loose for the day. Ten or twelve more mares, with foals, was turned into the same pasture.

The mares went after the tender green blades like their aim was to founder themselves. The colts sort of took a few steps away from their mothers to ease their curiosity as to the other little

HORSE

Two companions of the mesas roam the bleak badlands, facing the challenge of the wilds like true thoroughbreds!

by WILL JAMES

colts, and get acquainted. Soon they got to playing. Around and around they went, kicking up their heels, rearing, twisting, but there was no bucking. That wasn't in their blood.

Trainers and stablemen gathered to comment on this and that colt. There was great things expected, for they was all sired by one great stallion which had won many big stakes in handicaps and Derbys. The colts was all straight bays and sorrels, with hardly no white markings but a small star in the forehead. All but one. That one was dark brown, and instead of only a star in his forehead there was a long narrow blaze that run plumb to the tip of his nose. That colt was Colonel.

One day, along late summer, a little halter was slipped on Colonel's head and now begin his and the other colts' training to go around in circles in the pad-

dock. Then's when he felt the first sting of a whip. That surprised him and after the first few times he trotted or loped out of the reach of it. There was also the breaking to lead.

Weeks went on, then one day the owner of the stables and well-known at every race track the world over as a breeder of the fine race horses, and no less a person than Morgan Mansfield himself, came to the paddock where the little colts was having their short workouts. Mansfield had just got back from foreign lands.

Over half the colts was brought in for him to look over with great pride and satisfaction. Then another little feller was brought in, and Mansfield had to look twice in surprise.

"How did *it* get in?" he asked the trainer.

The trainer had to grin some. "Well, sir," he says, "I couldn't say but he was sired by Montezuma and his dam is one of your best, Lady Blue."

"Well, well," says Mansfield, puzzled. "Must be a throwback. That colt hasn't the color, action, nor resemblance of any to the others, and certainly not to Montezuma." He frowned. "I don't want to have it known that this colt is one of Montezuma's. Put him and Lady Blue in the pasture, with the mixed colts."

SO COLONEL and his mammy found themselves in a marshy pasture, where the fences wasn't so good and the stable was only whitewashed.

Just before the real cold winds and snow begin to come, Colonel was weaned and loaded in a horse trailer, whizzed North to a big stockyards where he was led to a stall and kept like in solitary confinement.

The man who'd brought him North came to see him the next day. There was another man with him. Colonel was made to trot and lope around a big square corral. The stranger finally put his hands in his overcoat pockets and walked away.

Another stranger was brought later and another after that. With the second one, Colonel's little heart missed a beat. There was no cold, far-off ways about him as with the other strangers and more to Colonel's surprise and pleasure, there was a good strong horse smell on that stranger's jacket. The other strangers' had only made him want to wrinkle up his nose and sneeze.

The two men begin to talk and Colonel figured that was a good time to take a roll. The man who'd handled him started to stop him, but the stranger stopped that.

"Aw, let the little feller roll," the stranger said, watching him. "I'll give you a hundred dollars for him every time he rolls clear over."

The colt had already rolled over twice and while the other man hesitated, he rolled over once more. Hoping he would roll over once or twice more the handler took the stranger's hand, saying, "That's a deal."

Colonel stood up, shook himself. He had rolled over just enough times to put over the deal and no more. But that didn't seem satisfactory to the track man.

"I'm sorry, Bo—" he begins with a queer grin.

"I'm no Bo," says the stranger. "My name is Bradley Braddock and you can make me a bill of sale for that colt."

"Well, Brad," says the other man, "I'm sorry but I can't let you have this colt for three hundred."

Brad was sort of dumbfounded, and the other, named Jerry, hurried on to explain that he was only selling the colt for somebody else whose name wasn't to be let out on account of him being so well-known in racehorse breeding.

This colt being of odd color, Jerry went on, had to be rid of on account he might reflect on the sire's blood. But it was expected that, even without proving the colt's pedigree, his appearance showed his fine breeding and that he would sell for at least a thousand.

Brad seemed to be some impressed. He pointed over to to some corrals.

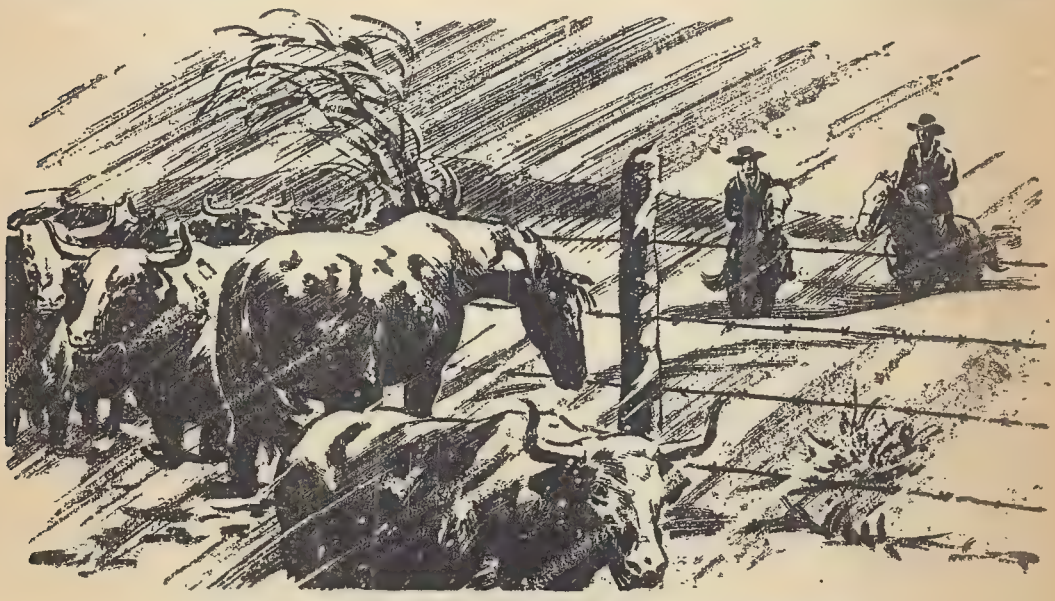
"See them horses?" he says. "Well, they're the ones you seen buck at the rodeo grounds, where you met me. They're going to be loaded tonight and shipped." He pointed at the colt. "This little feller will be going along with 'em and so far west before he's unloaded he'll just as well be in China for all you and your boss will ever see or hear of

him. I'm not going to let you back out of our deal. You let me see where you have a right to sell this colt, write me out a bill of sale and I'll split the difference with you between the three hundred I was to pay you and the five hundred you was doing high gambling to get."

The track man seen where he couldn't squirm out. So he handed out the release for sale of the colt. When the stranger saw the signature of the overseer, his face lit up in surprise.

next to him, for instance. He'd seen him and the others run away from the man when unloaded to be fed and watered. The horses he knew would follow man instead of running away.

The big gray had already killed two men and was always watching his chance to get another, like more in the same car. He was a natural-born outlaw, and the others had the same earmarks. Wild, Western horses. All the Western horse wants is his freedom. He'll fight for that, and some fight so



Brad and another rider found Colonel among the cattle (CHAP. IV)

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled," he says. "Old U-Bet Mansfield's stables! Now, I'll tell you what you don't want to tell me—that this colt's sire is Montezuma. But you and Mansfield don't have to worry about his identity being spread. I'm just going to make a good rope horse out of him. Let me see his registration papers, for my own satisfaction."

They was handed to him, and the two then walked to the yard office where the bill of sale was written. That night, Colonel wasn't tied up to no manger in no damp stall. He was on a mixed freight, puffing its way toward the Great Plains.

Colonel didn't think he'd care to play with the big mean-looking horses in the same car with him. Like the big gray

well they finally wind up in rodeo arenas to do their stuff there.

AS THE train headed on across the Plains and a cold wind blowed through the stock car, little Colonel sort of lost his thrill at the sight of so big and level a country. The third night was colder, and Colonel might of froze stiff, but that evening the train came to a stop. He was shivering fit for his bones to rattle apart when he heard a familiar voice which he nickered at with a mighty plain sound of distress.

Brad had to laugh at the call for help.

"Well, little feller," he says, "it doesn't go so good being away from steam-heated stables, does it? Better start growing a fur coat, but hang on a

spell and I'll soon fix you up with the next best."

This was a feed yard, and as the broncs was unloaded Brad came in with a couple of heavy-padded horse blankets.

Brad led the shivering colt out of the stall and put one of the blankets on him, then shoved up a bucket of warm water, and while the colt was drinking he fixed the blankets on him with cinches, latigos and tie ropes. When he got through all there could be seen of him was his ankles and his head. Then Brad brought in waste hay for bedding, also good hay for Colonel to feed.

He took the colt back to his stall and to the fresh hay, then left him to go take care of his own self at the depot restaurant.

The rest of the trip was no more hardship for Colonel, but there was still more to come. When the train came to a last stop for the stock, and all was unloaded at their home country's yards, there was near a foot of snow to greet 'em.

Colonel, still blanketed didn't seem to mind, until Brad came and stripped his pack for travel, remarking that he'd need his cinches and that he'd be keeping plenty warm bucking through the deep snow on the way to the ranch. So, he left only one blanket on him, and as the buckers and saddle horses was turned out of the yards Colonel was turned loose with 'em.

The colt was leary when he was turned loose with the big, wicked-looking horses, and when many circled around him he figured his end had come. But Colonel didn't need to have any fear, for the big fellers hadn't been near any little colts since away the spring before.

The blanket around Colonel's middle also kept the big horses from coming too close, for that blanket they didn't like the looks of, no more than they did a saddle. So they only touched nostrils with him. But that was still too close to suit Colonel, though, and he got sort of panicky.

The big gray killer coming to see what the "meeting" was all about soon scattered an opening to him. Him and the colt having already been sort of acquainted, and the big outlaw being used to the blanket on the colt didn't spook at it. The colt, recognizing his traveling pardner, felt relieved, and when the big gray took the lead, Colonel was glad to follow through the opening in the circle.

Colonel had never been "herd-broke," —never been driven loose to any distance with a bunch of horses before. But it seemed that he should stick to the trail and the bunch he was with, for he was in a big and desolate-looking country, and the snow was deep and he less than cared to break away from the big gray. He was, without his knowing, being herd-broke, and he got more education as the day wore on, traveling up and down hills. He was getting tired when Brad, like in encouragement, says:

"Kind of tough going, ain't it, little feller? But we've only got a few miles to go, then we'll stop for the night."

At the sound of Brad's voice and the feel of a human hand on his rump, Colonel nickered low. For right then, and as was his breeding, he'd rather have the company of humans than of horses.

Brad talked to him. The colt perked up, nickered and came on some more. He kept on a-coming, slow and staggering, until finally, seeing that he couldn't make it much farther, and coming to a sheltered spot amongst tall cottonwoods and a bare spot against bordering rims, Brad stopped and got off his horse. The colt smelled of the bare earth and went down to his knees, then flat on his side.

Brad looked at him and then at his horse. "Well, Roper," he says, "it looks like we'll have to make camp for a spell. Good thing we're on a bare spot and in good shelter. Going to dig up a little heat now."

In no time a fire was built. The colt blinked, felt its warmth, then his eyes closed and he went sound asleep. Roper followed suit, then Brad drug a few more heavy limbs acrost the fire, curled up to within arms' reach of the colt and also was soon asleep.

IT WAS near dark when he woke up, and Brad rolled a smoke while noticing the colt's eyes again blinking at the fire. The colt raised his head and begin looking around. "That's the spirit," says Brad. "Now stand up on them long legs of yours, and let's move on."

The colt only yawned wide, like he could sleep some more, but Brad had other ideas. He slapped him on the rump, saying, "Get up, you lazy bum." The first slap didn't do no good. It took a couple more slaps before the colt, seeing the cowboy meant it, finally got to his feet.

Right behind him was a tawny streak of lion which seemed to drop out of thin air (CHAP. III)

Brad took hope he'd easy enough make it the rest of the way in. But after getting out of the shelter, he seen that a near blizzard was sweeping acrost country. Brad couldn't expect the colt to follow by just talking to him. So, fastening a lead rope to his halter, Brad moved him around some to limber him up.

Then the outfit started out.

Brad figured it was now only about five miles to the line camp, where they planned to spend the night, but in this weather it would be at least two hours before it could be reached.

Brad had rode many long miles in that country, but these last few miles was the longest he'd ever rode. The colt was hanging back and weaving from side to side. With the lead rope to the saddle-horn, Roper was near dragging the colt, when Brad seen the line camp's fence. No sight had ever meant so much to that cowboy.

On account of the storm being so thick, Roper had been the first to see the fence and along it he went, pulling the colt until the gate was reached. Coming to a stop to open the gate, Brad knew what would happen. Roper no more than stopped pulling on the rope when down went the colt, and it looked like to stay.

But Brad wouldn't have it that way, when he had him so close to home. He slapped him hard from neck to rump to keep the blood circulating, and at last, with some talking to the colt, Brad pulled on the lead rope and he stood up.

There was no stop again, not even when the cabin door was reached, for Brad made a lunge for it, and in he went, pulling the colt inside after him.

"Where's them fried eggs?" he hollered at the other riders as they jumped up, lit a candle, and rubbed their eyes at the sight of the snow-covered man and colt.

It took the colt some time to rest and warm up. He fell down as soon as the door had been closed, and when he revived enough to look around his nose brushed against some hay. That revived him some more. It was hay padding the bunk where Brad was laying. Brad had tied him to his bunk.

He et all the hay within his reach while laying down, then got up to get more, and when Brad and the other boys got up to cook breakfast the colt was reaching up to get what more hay was hanging over the edge of the bunk above.

"I've heard of folks being et out of house and home," says the rider who'd used the bunk, "but I never heard of anybody having their bedding et out from under 'em.

Brad grinned. "I'll feed the culprit so he won't touch your bedding any more."

So, while the boys was getting breakfast, Brad placed grain on the bunk. One after another of the boys went out to dig up the woodpile or get some water, and when they returned, they was shaking their heads and remarking that the storm was worse than it'd been the evening before.

There could be no going on. If it let up by noon, the boys thought they could still make the ranch with the horses some time during the night. In the meantime they'd busy themselves at cooking up something for the noon and evening meal.

It was near noon when Brad, going out for his share of wood-cutting, thought the wind had of a sudden warmed up considerable. The colt could be out for a while anyway, so Colonel was led out in the whirling snow, brought in a shelter alongside of Roper and there that good horse was parted with his blanket. It was squaw-hitched to cover the colt, for coming out of the warm cabin would of been sort of hard on his thin hide. Besides Roper, being born and raised in that country, had seldom been blanketed, and he'd spent many a long winter on the open-range, coming out slick and fat at springtime.

II

AFTER a good noon meal, the boys stretched out on the bunks to relax and talk. The talk was started with the weather, but turned quick to the big rodeo in the East, where they'd just been for a couple of weeks. They'd had some fun and come back with less than what they went with, Brad being the only one with something to show for the trip. He'd won first money in both bronc and steer riding, and with his expenses and buying the colt he had about half of his winnings.

Brad's buying Colonel had been a puzzle to the riders. He should have his head examined and his money taken away from him, they said.

"Mighty fine range colts can be got for ten and twenty dollars," one remarked, "and not spindle-legged things that have to be brought into the house every time a cool breeze comes up."

"I'll bet he'll come to outrun any horse in this country," Brad answered. "You wait till you see him step out, then you'll be laughing the other way."

"How long will we have to wait and who's going to take care of him while he's growing? You're gone most of the time and you won't be allowed to keep him in the bunkhouse."

The talk went on about the coming winter. Jim was for staying at the ranch and making a hand of himself. Red was sort of undecided and would wait until Brad crossed the mountains, and let him know how the land lay as to contests there, and what prizes would be offered along the coast down to the Border.

There wouldn't be much doing in rodeos until after the first of the year, but there'd be considerable range work, so Brad and Jim and Red was always welcome at the Cal Goodwin outfit, known as the Hip O, the brand for cattle only. There was many different horse brands.

Cal Goodwin had been a sure enough race horse king in his day. Then his wife had died, and a baby daughter hadn't been enough to fill the gap, so Cal went on with his ponies, and to higher stakes. He went to the top and stayed there for longer than was expected. Then one fine morning he found himself borrowing railroad fare back home. All his horses and stables had gone into turf dust.

But his ranch he'd kept sacred to the memory of his wife, and it would be kept so for their daughter. Cal got on

his feet again and now he was raising stock for rodeos. Brad and Jim and Red was his agents and handlers and Cal couldn't got better men. They knew the ropes, they was well liked, and being they contested in other rodeos they played no favorites as to judges.

Summing it all up in the line camp, the boys figured they was riding pretty as compared to most other cowboys. It had quit snowing, and though the wind was still blowing it was a warm wind from another direction, and the snow had quit drifting.

They would get an early start the next morning, Brad said, and get to the ranch that afternoon.

Red went to work chopping wood. Brad walked toward the horses. They had come out of shelter, and were grazing on open land. It was easy to pick out the outlaws from the saddle horses, for at the sight of him they began to spook and run in a big circle around him, while the saddle horses just looked or grazed. Neither the colt nor Roper were amongst them but was soon located, grazing side by side.

Brad watched as the colt, his head close to Roper's, was grazing when Roper would paw the snow off for the grass underneath. He had to grin as the colt followed Roper and even tried to root him out of the grass he'd bared. When Roper wouldn't be rooted away, Brad was surprised to see the colt paw up his own grass.

"Learning pretty fast, young feller," he says. "Didn't think that with the hundreds of years of high breeding and man's steady care you'd keep the instinct of rustling your own food. But out here there'll be other instincts come back to you which has long been asleep in the blood of your past generations."

Little Colonel didn't scarcely see the corrals, sheds and other buildings which appeared in the distance late next day, and when finally he followed the horses into one of the corrals he hardly noticed 'em, not even the warm stable Brad helped him into. Inside he just slowly laid down on some dry hay and closed his eyes, as much as to say, "This must be home."

The boys in the bunkhouse was just as comfortable, after a good warm supper. And next morning a good breakfast was spread out by the ranch cook which was nicknamed "Grouch" on account he was just the opposite. When the boys bent back to the bunkhouse for a smoke, Old Cal came to join 'em.

BRAD was the first one he picked on. Putting his hand out he says, "I'm mighty proud of you, my boy, for bringing home three first prizes for bronc riding. I sure want to congratulate you." Then he turned to Jim and Red. "You two boys didn't do so doggone bad either," he said, "and I'm also proud of you, and the way my stock was handled by you and Brad."

"We sure done our best," says Red, "and now don't blame me nor Jim for the addition to the stock."

"What addition?" asks Cal.

"Ain't you seen it yet?" Red grinned. "It's in one of the empty stud's box stalls, and for all of me the stall is still empty."

Brad put on his coat and says, "Come on, Cal, I'll show *it* to you, as Red calls him."

In the stable, and as the colt blinked at the two men, Cal also done some blinking. Brad led the colt out of the stall, and Cal walked all around him. Finally he says:

"Why, this is a hot blood all the way through or I've never seen one. Where and how did you get him?"

"Just picked him up at the yards where we shipped from after the last rodeo."

Cal rubbed his chin a bit. "Kind of queer," he says. "Know anything about him?"

"Plenty enough to satisfy me," says Brad.

"What do you aim to do with him?"

"Thought I'd give him to Virginia. Maybe she'd like him to train and for a sort of a pet."

Cal rubbed his chin, "Mighty fine of you, my boy, and Virginia will sure be tickled witless. But doggone it, Brad, I was through with racing stock. Lost 'em all sixteen years ago, when Virginia was three years old." Cal walked to the stable door, looked outside, then turned back to Brad. "Well," he says: "why don't you go up to the house and tell her?"

"I forgot your dealings with thoroughbreds and that you was through with 'em," says Brad.

Old Cal sort of melted. "I spoke before I thought, Brad," he says. "Even if I'm through with thoroughbreds, Virginia would be happy in having him. We'll see what she says."

As Brad was currying the colt, Virginia herself appeared at the stable door, and blinked in surprise at sight of the colt. She just had to touch him to see if he was real. Finally, some excited, she asked her dad:

"Whose is he?"

Old Cal waved a hand towards Brad. "Ask him," he says.

"If you really want to know," Brad says, "he's from the bluegrass country. And he's yours, if you want him."

The girl looked at Brad, then to her dad, and finally managed to say:

"Oh, Dad, is it true? Can I really have him?"

Old Cal only shrugged. In the wink of an eye Virginia had her arms around his neck and kissed him. She got Brad about as quick. That clinched the deal, and he didn't try to duck.

Virginia, after some winters at college, was now going to be spending the coming one at the ranch. Cal, missing her more than anyone but himself ever knew, was right glad. He figured the colt would be a lot of company to her. She could train him to be a fine horse. For what purpose she didn't know. His breed wasn't much good for anything but racing and she didn't know how she could have use for any such.

An important thing now was to give him a name. Thinking of the country he was from, and how many of high standing was called Colonel there, she finally named the little thoroughbred Colonel.

The weather was like Indian summer, after the storm that'd come when the bucking stock had been trailed home. Colonel was turned into a big corral every day, adjoining another where a few horses was kept right long. With that company to rub nostrils with through the corral bars, the sun and the big space to play in, he got well weaned away from his home pastures, even his mother.

It helped some when Brad would come near, then there was the big gray outlaw he'd liked being near to during the trip, and Roper. But it was Virginia who was first in his mind.

IN THE morning she fed him his grain, groomed and scratched him, then led him out into the big corral to have his roll. She would smile and enjoy watching him as much as he enjoyed rolling.

Then one day, after the beef cattle was gathered to be trailed in and shipped and the whole outfit came to the ranch for one-night stay, there was amongst the saddle horses one poor little colt only a couple of months old. Brad had found him alone and moping along like, weak and wobbling from thirst and huger. It was figured that as there was a few bunches of wild horses in that country the colt was one of 'em and had been left behind during a chase by wild horse runners. When the beef was gathered and the outfit started back for the ranch, room was made for him in the wagon, and at the ranch he was turned loose with the saddle horses.

When Virginia rode up to the saddle horse bunch, Red who'd been driving them, seeing her looking at the colt in wonder, had to laugh some.

"Yep," he says. "Another one of Brad's thoroughbreds, only this one is not from the bluegrass country. But he's a sure enough thoroughbred little wild horse. But the poor little feller ain't had no chance."

Virginia gave him the chance. In the same corral with Colonel where there was the warm water and choice hay, it was less than a week before he begin to be up and a-coming.

The girl watched the little wild colt steady gaining strength, and had a sort of rewarding surprise when one day, as she turned him out in the big corral, she seen him start to run and let out a squeal like he wanted to play. Colonel, now full of vigor, seemed as surprised as the girl was, and like for encouragement went to running circles around him. Colonel's acting up was good medicine for the little wild colt, and from then on his strength came fast and surprising. So Virginia begin to think of a name for him too, a name fitting the breed of his ancestors or suggesting of their country, the same as she had with Colonel.

The name would have to be Spanish, the Spaniards having brought the first horses to America some few hundred years before, and this little feller being a descendant of them same horses,

which had spread over the whole Southwest and gone wild as antelope. Virginia at last decided to call him "Charro," meaning top cowboy, and sort of Jim Dandy. . . .

Along about middle winter there come a notice of a good rodeo being pulled off away to the south and west. Brad slipped on his best boots, took his pet spurs and away he went. He done well down there in the warm climes, so Red soon joined him, and Cal was without any riders at the ranch. But as that had been expected he soon had one good one who had no rodeo ambition.

Old Man Winter, after covering the land with a good blanket of snow, kept his grip on a cold that averaged from zero to ten below. There was no thawing nor warm spells. The way it stayed cold well over the season, when spring did come it came as every living thing would wish it.

It was days after the first meadow lark was heard before patches of bare ground begin to show, and much longer before the frost got out of the ground and the grass begin to warm up to the heat of the sun.

Finally there come a time when, as the colts was turned out into the big corral and went to limbering up with their play, they would sniff high at the air and look through the bars at the country around. It was getting green and the smell of the thawing earth and sprouting grass was what they was filling their nostrils and lungs with.

Virginia understood their craving for the green grass, and they made it mighty hard on her for not letting them out. They wouldn't follow her around no more, and as she'd sometimes talk to 'em they'd be more apt to be looking thru the bars than cocking an ear to her. But she knew that once they got a taste of the green grass they wouldn't touch their hay no more unless starved, and the grass wouldn't be near enough to do 'em, not for a while yet. Then, a few warm nights and days come, when the snow line got higher up the tall mountains and all begin to grow and bud, Virginia opened one big corral gate wide.

THE colts just stood and blinked, for a spell, like a blindfold had just been lifted off their eyes. Colonel nudged the

The bucking that little gray did made even the watchers dizzy (CHAP. VII)

girl with his nose, then looked past her as much as to ask if it was true, this opening to the green pasture. Charro didn't wait. The green grass drawed him as natural as the warm sun drawed the grass itself, and he took the lead out to it. Colonel followed then, and once out in the big pasture he was at first for kicking up his heels and having a good run, but soon as he put his nose down to earth and got a whiff of the grass that stopped him as if he'd took root there. Virginia, watching him and Charro, was having as much enjoyment as the colts.

To make life more interesting there was work to be done which was much to Virginia's liking at that time of the year. As she rode down the valley, little white-faced calves began to jump up and scamper away from where they'd been sunning themselves. The youngest would only raise up, blink at her, stand and watch her ride by. Then there was others, a day or two old which, hid by their mothers, would flatten to the ground at the sound of her horse's hoofs and wouldn't even wiggle an ear if she rode by.

Them hiding little fellers was the ones that caused most of her work, because, as sometimes happens, a calf is born in places where he can't get up. There was more than a couple of hundred head in the herd which Virginia was keeping an eye on. These was cows that was to have early calves and had been cut out and kept close to the ranch for the care some of 'em would need.

With that responsible work and other riding, with her interest in the colts, her picked saddle horses and other stock, she kept pretty happily busy outside. Then there was the big ranchhouse, too, and the cheerful company of faithful Anne, the good old-fashioned housekeeper who had about taken a mother's place in her affections.

Once in a while some of her college friends would come to the ranch to visit, and there was a few sprouts and older gents on her trail, but none seemed to make her heart flutter any. To her, the range, horses and cattle was what she'd never dream of wanting to get away from.

With the coming of spring, Brad and Red come a-straggling into the ranch after their rounds at contesting. It was good to be home again, to work where they'd left off three months or so before. The four-year-old colts they'd started to break was run in again, and now could stand more riding.

With the first handling of these wild, strong broncs, Virginia was often in the corral watching Brad and Red ride the snorty ones, and there was a spell then when the little fellers, Colonel and Charro, was some neglected. But they sure didn't need no more care now, and even though they'd come to meet her when she came in the pasture it was more like saying hello to one who'd been such a good friend to them during the winter. But even though they wouldn't have cared much for grain, much less hay and couldn't be attracted that way, there was one more way. They was fast shedding and their hides was mighty itchy, especially Charro's, whose hair was coming out in patches.

That was when Virginia came along with a curry comb and stiff brush and gave each a good going over. That beat whatever else she might of given 'em. She would spend quite a bit of time doing that most every day, and when in a couple of weeks' time they got slick and shiny and no more winter hair was left, they still hankered for more scratching, because then the flies begin to pester them. Virginia would go to work on 'em, and the positions the colts sometimes twist themselves into to get the most advantage of the scratching was comical.

Brad, happening to catch her at work on the colts one evening, had to laugh some as he watched her.

"Just in time, Brad," she says, handing him the brush. "My arms have given out."

"Which one have you been working on?" Brad asks.

"Both of 'em, at the same time as much as I can. If I work on only one the other would sure tramp me down."

Brad was in the pasture to help her most every evening after that. It was one time while Brad was brushing Colonel's fine mane, that Virginia remarked:

"He's getting pretty, isn't he?"

"Sure is." Brad grinned. "Always was."

"You shouldn't have given him to me."

"Eh, what?" Brad turned to her, surprised. "But you like him, don't you?"

"Of course. But you would have so

much more use for him than I ever would. He'd make you a good fast horse for calf roping, and he might be fast enough so he could be used in the regular races."

"Yeh," says Brad, sort of thoughtful. "Yeh, there's no doubt but what he'll be fast enough."

"Yes," Virginia went on, "he'll be so fast he'd pass a wild steer and never even see him, let alone try to turn him."

Brad, looking at Colonel's long slim legs and trim ankles, had to admit she was right. Colonel was all race horse.

"Sure," he finally says, "and I guess there won't be much use in trying to teach him anything about the tricky range cow. But that's for you to worry about." He laughed, "I'm no Indian giver. I gave you the horse, and you even clinched the deal with a kiss."

Virginia didn't try to hide her relief.

"I just wanted to make sure," she says. "Because I wouldn't want to have him taken away from me after I go to the work of training and making a winner of him."

Not to be outdone, Brad wrote out a long bill of sale of the colt to her that evening and tied it on the horn of her saddle.

III

NEITHER spoke any more on the subject during the evenings that followed. They was careful not to. Then one fine morning, after the other boys had rode into the ranch from their winter camps, more saddle horses was gathered, a wagon was loaded with grub, and the whole outfit started out for the range for the spring works, leaving Virginia to do what riding there was around the ranch.

Though the herd she'd been keeping tab on had been turned out, she managed to find some riding when she wanted it. Fact is, she was sort of glad when all the riders was gone. That gave her more responsibility, and with Brad's going Colonel was sure enough all hers.

Colonel was now over a year old, and he seemed to've got mighty tall for his age, and so narrow built. Virginia sometimes had to laugh at him and Charro, side by side, for poor little stunted Charro, looked near like a Shetland colt alongside of him. Charro, though, looked as if he'd some day be a tough little horse that could sure cover the rough hills. His color, too, was kind of light-blue roan and that would be hard to see in the badland country.

One evening Cal and three others rode into the main corral. One was Brad, and for the next couple of days them three riders got busy preparing to hit out for rounds of the rodeos when they'd be gone until late fall again. The bucking horses was corralled and looked over. A few of the old ones, also others that wasn't much more inclined to buck, was cut out to be turned out to freedom or sold. These were replaced by fresh mean ones and there couldn't be a tougher bunch of outlaws.

It went the same with the longhorn steers and bulls. Two riders come to take them out, and early the following morning, Brad and Red and Jim started out with the buckers. Brad's parting remark to Virginia was:

"And don't forget, too much sugar ain't good for him."

She smiled back at him like as much as to say that now he'd be gone, Colonel would be all hers again. Summer came on with the ranch doing well. Virginia rode with her dad, and sometimes would be gone two and three days with him on circle of the range, visiting neighboring cowfolks, and bringing back strayed stock.

The two also took on early, small rodeos close by. Then come time for a bigger rodeo, a four-day one, including the Fourth of July, and being that Cal's string of outlaw buckers and longhorns had been contracted for that contest, there was nothing but what him and Virginia should jump in the car and attend.

They was two tired but pleased people when they drove into the ranch late the night after the rodeo was over, and Virginia didn't at all hear the early chirping of the birds when the next morning come. Cal didn't do much better, and it was late when the two ate breakfast and sort of went over the rodeo with Anne, telling her what a great contest it had been, Brad winning first prize in bronc riding, Red first in bull-dogging, and Jim second in steer riding and roping, and so on.

Anne was pleased to know, but somehow her smile didn't seem all there. Virginia got to wondering. She wondered some more as Anne sort of dodged her every look, but she waited until her

dad was through and went outside.

"What is it, Anne?" Virginia asked then. "Something wrong?"

"Well, not exactly," says Anne, who now seemed anxious to speak. "It's just that Colonel and the other little colt got out of the pasture and got away. This young town feller, the one who wanted to be a cowboy, left the gates open. But he realized what a bad mistake he'd made, and he told Jack about it. But by then the colts had a couple of days head start."

Jack was the cowboy who'd done the riding on the ranch.

Virginia tried to hope that they couldn't have gone far, but Anne shattered that when she said Jack had rode the whole range without seeing any sign of 'em.

"He didn't want to stay away from the ranch," she said, "but he stayed two days and one night, rode well into the wild horse country. So he decided to wait till you folks come back, and then ride the country well. From what Jack says them colts are sure enough with some wild bunch. But they'll—"

Virginia didn't wait to hear any more. She dashed away to her bedroom for her riding clothes. . . .

LITTLE Charro had been the first to notice the pasture gate being open. This only left 'em into a big field where stock was kept off and hay would later be cut and stacked for the winter's feeding. But with the colt's natural curiosity, as they went to rambling over the big field, Charro found another gate and there he took the lead to freedom.

The little wild colt, feeling the openness in his blood, stuck his nose in the air and looked all around near like a freedom-loving human released from prison. He zigzagged considerable, followed none of the plain trails, but with all his aimless-like traveling he was heading straight for his home range where his wild horse instinct drawed him.

With Colonel there was an entirely different feeling. The only home he knew now was the ranch, and he was going away from there into another strange world, creating in him another strange feeling. So he didn't race ahead of his little pardner. And when Charro would stop to look around Colonel would do the same, but most always back the way he come, the ranch.

He sometimes listened as though Virginia was calling him and would get to wondering if he should go on. Maybe he should of stayed by the saddle horses him and Charro had been pasturing with. Bunches of horses was sighted when the horse range was reached, and Colonel was going towards every bunch. But Charro wouldn't have none of that, and made a circle around and past 'em.

Then, suddenly, they come onto a bunch that Charro hadn't seen and couldn't dodge. Colonel soon learned why his little pardner had dodged such bunches, for at one glance of the colts a wicked-looking, long-maned black stallion came on a high lope to meet 'em. Little Charro lit out as fast as he could for a wild plum thicket and hid, while Colonel, seeing no more harm in the black than there'd been with the outlaw buckers he'd got to know kind of wondered.

But he didn't get to wonder long. The black stallion charged into Colonel with all of his teeth, hoofs and weight, and sent him a-sailing to roll quite a few times before he come to a dazed footing. The colt was still in a daze when the stallion lit into him again, but Colonel got to sensing what little Charro already knew, and he started moving as fast as he could. But he didn't get away fast enough, and the stallion champed his teeth on the back of his neck. The fact that Colonel was trying to slip away was all that saved him from a broken neck.

As it was, he was sent a-rolling once more, and when he got up it was fairly clear in his mind that he should get to running as quick as he could. But the stallion would of got him again, only little Charro showed himself and attracted the stallion's attention, and that saved Colonel's neck. The black stopped just long enough to investigate Charro, which had again got in the thick thorny plum thicket where the openings was too low for the big horse to follow. Besides, Charro was still too much of a colt for the stallion to get after. By the time the black got through his investigation, Colonel was well away. The stallion shook his head in defiance and warning and went back to his bunch.

With the surprise and scare that Colonel had got he kept on running until he begin to tire. When he finally stopped

he was quite some distance from where he'd met the stallion and left Charro, and looking around he seen he was on his way back to the ranch. He looked around for Charro now, for he was still mighty scared. He nickered, but there was no answer.

Then he realized he was thirsty. The last water he'd seen was where the stallion and his bunch had been, but he was far from hankering to go back to that place, and now that he was on his way back to the ranch he was kind of debating which way to turn. It would be kind of hard to go by his lonesome, being he was so attached to little Charro. But could he find Charro? He knew he could find the ranch, and water on the way there.

He sort of circled around, then headed back in the direction of the water-hole where he'd last seen Charro. Meanwhile, Charro, also far from wanting to lose his long-legged partner, had got out of his hiding place after the stud bunch had watered and gone. He went to take a drink himself and then, instead of hitting for his home range, went back the way Colonel had gone, towards the ranch. But he wasn't traveling near as fast as Colonel had in getting away from the stallion, and it wasn't far from the water-hole where Colonel heard a loud nicker, and recognized Charro coming out of the brush. He nickered and trotted on to meet him.

THERE was a little horse talk as to what next and which way. Colonel, feeling safer with his little pardner near thought only of water and took the lead this time. Not a horse was in sight as the two neared the water-hole, nor none as Colonel quenched his thirst some, with Charro keeping watch.

And Colonel done one thing which he'd never done before. He got down to his knees and went on rolling in the few inches of water and sticky mud. The flies is what had decided him to do that. They'd been pestering him considerable, especially on a raw gash on his neck made by the teeth of the stallion. When he stood up he was all of a buckskin color with mud, not at all like the thoroughbred son of the great Montezuma. But that sure didn't worry him any. The mud would keep the flies away, and the bleeding gash was also well covered and protected. It would still be when the mud dried.

They traveled along, grazing as they went, and when night come they got up high on a little strip of bench land where the strong grass was a-plenty and a cool breeze fanned their hides.

They stayed on the high bench all that night. When the sun came up they sunned themselves and listened to the faint noises of the wild which they could hear for a long ways in the stillness of the morning. Then, Charro taking the lead, they started on the move again, and headed for the most broken up and spooky-looking country Colonel had ever seen. To look at the land from the high bench where the colts had been, a stranger would think it waterless, grassless and that not a breathing thing could live in it.

But getting down into that country, as the colts was now doing, the stranger would of seen big tufts of strong grass amongst the crags and in scattering patches of scrub brush. There was also water, little springs bubbling up out of the earth. Them springs was far apart and some poisonous, as the bleached bones of animals around 'em would show.

There was also game in that country, such as rabbit and deer, and that made it good country for mountain lions and coyote, especially the lion, for there's no meat the lion likes better than that of a yearling colt. And in the heart of that country, Charro and Colonel was trailing.

After getting down over the rim of the high bench and into that unpromising-looking land, Colonel sort of felt that a big gate had closed after him and would keep him from ever coming back, that he would become a different kind of a horse. The strangeness of the country had a lot to do with making him feel that way, but as he wound around steep pinnacles in following Charro, where it sometimes looked as though the bottom was a mile down, he felt that the adventuring was sure enough beginning.

There was places where he stopped, hardly thinking he could make it, but Colonel had sort of burned his bridges behind him. He wouldn't of tried to come back on the same trail Charro had taken him, and he sure wouldn't try any other for fear it might be still worse. He wouldn't leave Charro anyhow. Colonel

would have to make the best of his "freedom," even if he'd sometimes come to wish he was in some safe paddock and humans was near.

That freedom got to sort of wearing out on him as the days went by, especially after one exciting experience. One fine day him and Charro was grazing on a steep side of a hill when Charro of a sudden raised his head, snorted, and at once scrambled down the steep hill like the very devil was after him. Colonel, now having learned that such quick action from Charro meant that he should do the same, tumbled down the hill right after him, and not any too soon, for right behind him was a tawny streak of lion which, seeming like to drop out of thin air, was close to within claw reach of his tail.

A lion can make good speed for a short distance, specially coming down a hill, but Colonel also made good speed, and to his own surprise made the bottom on all fours and still a-running. From there the colts left the lion a safe distance behind, and Colonel, all spooked up, right away passed Charro on the level stretch of a dry wash. In his stampeding that way he run on without realizing he left Charro behind, and then, like out of nowhere come another lion, blocking the narrow wash where the walls was straight up.

Some away back and asleep instinct must of come to life sudden in Colonel's think tank right then, for a good cowhorse couldn't of turned and picked up speed any faster than Colonel did, and he tore the earth on his way back up the wash. This second lion didn't even try to follow that long-legged streak of horseflesh. He just snarled and glared as he disappeared around a turn in the wash.

COLONEL was still coming full speed, head high and looking behind to see if the lion was coming when, making the turn, he near bumped into Charro, and stopped short. Now they was between two mighty hungry-acting lions, and the deep wash they was into, with high and steep walls on both sides, had 'em in about the same fix as Daniel in the lion's den, only with no Divine Power to protect 'em.

But little Charro didn't seem to be much scared and that sort of calmed Colonel some. Charro having found out that he could outrun the yellowish, tail-lashing first lion, had been busy sort of stalking that animal. Now with Colonel close behind, he went on investigating. And the lion, full of tricks, went to work on Charro's curiosity. He went his silent way to the thick brush where the colts had been grazing, and showing just enough of himself so the colt would come closer for a better look, he waited. When the nosy colt did come closer the lion then went on through the patch of brush, to circle up to the ledge where he'd sprung off before. He now had the colt close enough to it so he'd sure get him this time.

Getting near that ledge again and seeing the lion disappear through the brush sort of left Charro nervous, with a strong hunch that he'd better move. He did move, just in time again, and now that his fun and investigating was over he was ready to go on again, down the wash, and then with Colonel right by his side he spotted the other lion.

Charro wasn't stumped nor scared. That wasn't in his breed. He sized up both sides of the wash for a way out and at the steepness of 'em he seen where he'd made a mistake, getting into such a trap. There was only one opening which he figured him and Colonel *might* be able to make. This wasn't exactly an opening but a steep slide of shale rock which had come down into the wash and near blocked it. It would be a mighty steep climb where a horse might make one step and lose two in the loose shale.

But there was no other way out. Charro was sure of that. Running his nose along Colonel's neck, as a signal for "Let's go," he made a running start for the steep shale slide, Colonel right after him, and at the same time, the lions, seeing their intended victims trying to get away, both made a rush for 'em.

It was quite some scramble. There couldn't be no speed made, and it was a great wonder that any headway could be made at all, but there was a lot of fast pawing and reaching for footholts, and there the colts had the advantage. In their scrambling to get up the slide the lions' lunging didn't get 'em no closer to the colts, and with the pelting of the flying sharp shale they couldn't dodge, they had to let up and to figure on some other way of getting their prey.

But there was still another chance,

for the lions. The colts, was near to where they could get off the slide and on more solid footing when, stopping for a much-needed breathing spell, Charro again raised his head and snorted his fear. For where he figured on getting off the slide to solid ground he seen, a-shining to the sun behind some low brush, the tops of rounded heads and flattened ears of two more lions.

Now it looked like him and Colonel was sure enough done for. He was about stumped as to what to do, when the lions at the bottom made him decide to do something, and mighty quick. For now that the colts was standing still and there was no more sliding shale to hinder 'em they went to springing for them. Charro took the one other chance, which was sure a desperate one, and decided to try the other side of the slide, the opposite from where the lions above was. It was a mighty dangerous place, for one misstep meant a thirty-foot fall to the bottom of the wash, and the lions there.

But there was no choice, and in his mightiest lunging and scrambling, Charro finally made it to the steep edge and sort of balanced there before going on and making room for Colonel, who also was doing some tall scrambling.

Colonel didn't hesitate, and that was all that saved him. The odds was sure against him, but he finally got up to the side of Charro, his heart beating fit to bust.

They'd made it!

The two stood for a spell, taking long breaths. Then Charro went investigating. He soon spotted the second pair of lions, still in the same place. Taking a look around to make sure for a good quick getaway in case him and Colonel had to, Charro took the lead down towards the lions. There seemed to be nothing ferocious about these much as he came closer, ready to turn and go to running. These was much smaller than the other two, and only seemed to want to hide. When Charro come nearer they just showed their teeth and moved away.

Charro got the feeling he had 'em buffaloed. To carry on a big bluff he rushed at 'em. To his surprise and pleasure the bluff worked. Colonel joined in on the fun and in mighty quick time had the two a-scampering and rushing for the slide where they rolled over and over and slid down to their papa and mama.

IV

QUITE a strip of country was covered by Charro and Colonel in the days that followed. At last Charro didn't seem to want to go any further, only to graze and water at the edge of the badlands. It was where he'd been foaled, and he'd come to it as natural as any grown horse would. Even though he'd been only about a month old when his mother and him and the bunch they was with had been chased from it by wild horse runners, he still knew his home range.

Charro ddin't go to looking for his mother. Fact is he wouldn't of known her if he'd seen her. Like Colonel, he was weaned so's to entirely forget all about her, him by his suffering and then the long winter at the ranch, and Colonel by the distance and the change of climate. But Charro still had a range that was natural home to him, where Colonel had none. But that didn't seem to matter much to the thoroughbred no more. His home would now be on Charro's home range.

At the edge of the badlands there was more shade, water and grass, also the badlands to hit for when in danger of mustang runners. Not a day or night passed but two or three bunches was seen, but Colonel was no more for running towards 'em. He'd learned a good lesson from the black stallion.

Charro, being already wise and mighty careful, wasn't for making acquaintance with any bunch right quick, nor even show himself to 'em. A right bunch would come along some time and then would be time enough. He was plenty satisfied to be just with Colonel.

But as things went so well with the two runaways, the feeling sure didn't carry to the Hip O Ranch, where now Virginia was doing a heap of fretting and riding, trying to track 'em down.

She knew right away that the "little rascal," as she now called Charro, had been the leader, that Colonel would never have gone by himself. But that didn't help any. She rode the horse range, hoping that they would be with some bunch there. Finally making sure they wasn't on the horse range, she went to skirting the badlands, and

wouldn't get back to the ranch until after dark, on a tired horse.

But, on another and fresh horse, she'd be out again early the next morning, making big circles from the ranch, and inquiring from neighbor folks which was a day's ride away. There wasn't a bunch of horses within forty miles of the ranch she didn't look through, and with the neighbors also being on the lookout that made quite a stretch of country covered.

Then one day when the colts had been gone about a month, she asked her dad if he would have Brad ride the country where he'd found Charro. Brad was glad to go, for he'd been near as worried about the colts as she was.

"I'll send Red with him," Cal had gone on to tell her, "and a pack horse with grub and bedding so they can ride for a few days. But I'll do that only on one condition, Virginia, and that's that you rest up for a spell. You're about all in and so are your horses."

Virginia was sort of glad to agree, now that Brad and Red would be out to relieve her. Three, and then four days wore on, and no sight of the riders. But she felt that as long as they was looking for the colts there'd still be hope.

Then on the fifth day, late, Brad and Red did show up. They was so late the ranchhouse was all dark. They was glad because they would rather not tell of their failure until morning.

If they could of had another day or so they would of found 'em because they'd been combing the badlands and had been close to where they was ranging. But they had to come back to handle the stock for the rodeo. They would of told Virginia of the only country they hadn't rode, but they thought they might get another chance to ride that country some other time.

Virginia took the disappointment sort of calm, thanked Brad and Red, bid 'em good luck as they drove away. Then, watching the car disappear in a cloud of dust, it seemed her hopes sort of went with it.

The summer wore on, and though Virginia notified the two line riders, their riding never took 'em anywheres near the wild horse range. Cal, himself, seldom got far away from the home ranch, and the handling of the outfit from there. Secretly, he didn't care much if the colts was found or not. He'd been through with thoroughbreds, and it was only for Virginia's sake that he sort of wished they would be found.

But the colts had come mighty close to being seen by humans a couple of times that summer, and for a short time, Charro had. Mustang runners had been swooping in, and it'd been only through Charro's watching, and keeping in out-of-the-way places that him and Colonel hadn't been rode onto and maybe into traps with the wild bunch. At the first sight of dust, Charro was quick to lead the way to where him and Colonel could see but not be seen. Colonel, knowing Charro's wisdom, would always follow.

THERE'D been one time when Colonel couldn't follow. He'd got so sick and weak he could hardly navigate. It'd been from drinking from a pool where alkali from one spring and sulphur from another run together. For a week or so afterwards he was moping. He lost his slim roundness and was in near as bad a shape as Charro had been when Brad found him, and he didn't care to eat. But Charro managed to lead him on to another spring, too small for any bunch, and with only a little sulphur in it.

Charro took his stand to watch over his sick pardner, and now that he was near a year old he could do a mighty fair job. He'd been grazing at a little distance one day, while Colonel was sickest, when he seen a rider coming his way, so close he'd had no chance to duck out of sight. He suspicioned that rider to be a mustanger, so his wild instinct led him to act. He'd hit out as though a bunch of hornets had lit into him and kept a-going that way towards the badlands until he come to a tall pinnacle, which he circled soon as he lost sight of the rider. Then on the other side of it, seeing no sign of rider he started slowly back for where he'd left Colonel in hiding.

Charro's jumping out of the way did more than lead the rider away from the spring for, seeing the lone yearling hit out that rider felt satisfied there'd been no more horses there. So if it hadn't been for Charro's play, Colonel would of been found.

Colonel was sick for a couple of weeks and got down to a shadow. It took him still longer to recuperate enough so he could go on. Charro now went on more

on the outskirts of his range, for mustang runners was getting numerous. Gradually, bunches of wild horses started to migrate out of that range.

It was during such migrating that Charro finally decided to join one of the bunches. There was only six in the bunch Charro figured would be all right. Four of 'em was young stallions which had been whipped out of bunches by older ones, still too young to hold their own. The other two was old reprobate saddle horses, and they made wise leaders and wasn't afraid of the wicked fighting stallions of any bunches. All they'd keep shy of was lions, rattlers and men on horseback.

Getting acquainted didn't take long. There was just the ordinary squealing and pawing but no fighting, and the bunch went on, and Charro and Colonel followed. It wasn't that Charro was lonesome with only Colonel, but that in numbers there'd be a steadier kept watch, along with a feeling of more security. Colonel thought so, and after he got acquainted he traveled along by the side of any as well as he did with Charro.

But when anything happened to set the bunch spooked he was right away by Charro's side again. The bunch was for high-tailing it at the sight of a rider, and Colonel enjoyed them running spurts, much more than Charro and the other wild ones did. There was times, when all was running at their best, they would still be too slow for him and he'd run with the leaders. Sometimes he'd run ahead of them, but then they wouldn't follow his lead.

There come one time when his lead turned out to be a wise one. But the bunch hadn't followed him, none but Charro, when a rider swooped down on the bunch and got it going where he wanted it to go, towards a blind trap. Colonel was for turning, but Charro again took the lead, right away from the bunch.

Colonel near stopped while halfways between Charro and the bunch. When he decided, he put on such speed in catching up with Charro that the mustang runner, even though mighty busy riding hard after the remaining six of the bunch, couldn't help but take note of the dark, long-legged yearling. He'd never seen any such before, not even amongst some mighty fast and grown wild ones. And that made him wonder, not only at the speed of him but for what he might be. For well-bred horses would sometimes get away and join the wild ones. Sometimes, also, the studs would "steal" mares from the range stock bunches.

The mustanger knew that, even with the fast horse he was riding, he wouldn't have no chance to catch up with that dark streak, but he somehow felt that the dark colt wouldn't be as hard to manage as the light-colored one he was with. The dark colt didn't act like the wild ones and didn't show no fear and wouldn't make a break as a regular wild one would when crowded. He didn't figure he'd leave the light-colored one, and that one could be hazed into a trap, the mustanger thought, for he didn't have the speed. So right then, he figured he would get after that fast one and his pardner on the next day.

BUT them two didn't seem to be nowheres in or around that country on the next day. He mustanger had got fooled, and by the wise little Charro. Him and Colonel had left no tracks, for they hadn't gone on. Charro had stopped soon as the mustanger and the bunch had disappeared. Then, instead of making a circle he'd backtracked, and his and Colonel's trail was soon mixed with others of that same day. There was no fresh trail of two colts to follow and to make it still harder on the mustanger, they run onto the two renegade saddle horses to mix their trail with.

Them two renegades being wise to traps had gone past the riders, leaving the four young studs on into the trap.

Them four, Colonel, Charro, and the two renegades saddle horses made as wise a small bunch as there was in that wild horse country, all excepting one of them, and that one made up with speed for the wisdom he lacked. If he ever got a bunch that could follow him he'd soon lead 'em on to freedom, or into a trap.

The four was well up in the mountains when the first big show of the year come. It didn't let up and go to chinooking. It stayed and piled on steady, and when it finally let up, cold winds came to drift it into deep banks, bare the land a little where there was no feed, and cover up what there was.

It was the start of a hard winter when

much stock and game would be snowbound and many would starve. Riders would be at their busiest in all kinds of such weather, breaking trails and freeing snowbound stock. They would have no time to run mustangs, and the wise renegades with Charro and Colonel knew it. They got so they would roam and feed where they felt like and didn't run much any more at the sight of a rider.

Roaming the barren country in search of feed, the four got into the valley where over a year before the Hip O wagon had made camp and Charro had rode in it to the ranch. Colonel realized he wasn't so far from the ranch, and there was no badlands between, and the brown colt, getting lean and gant, often looked towards the ranch and tried to lead the bunch in that direction.

If Charro would of only followed, Colonel would of taken the lead back to the ranch, leaving the two older horses. But even though Charro would still rather have the company of his pal, Colonel, he wouldn't go the direction of the ranch. A deer or an elk might, for the hay they would maybe get, but not a wild horse, and Charro had gone back to that stage.

The deep snow, scarce feed and cold didn't tell on him or the other two as it did on Colonel. They only lost some of their summer roundness and wasn't ganted up nor lean as Colonel was. Besides, their hair was thicker and longer, where Colonel's hair wasn't much longer than it'd been the summer before. The severe cold was as much the cause of his ganting up as the scarcity of feed, and it was no wonder he looked sort of longingly towards the ranch. There'd be warmth there, good hay, and even warm water to drink.

As the severe cold and wind kept up it was also a wonder he didn't go back there, even alone, but horses being more attached to one another than any other animal he hadn't wanted to leave Charro.

Then Old Man Winter blasted him with stinging snow and cold winds that chilled him to the bone. And, the sudden cold blasts hit him as he was quite a distance from Charro, which he'd been sort of trying to coax to follow, and in the blinding snow he couldn't make it back to him. He tried but he was near like a tumbleweed against that wind and he was forced to put his rump to it and only stand. Charro, in some shelter with the others, nickered for him, but the whistling wind killed the sound, and he knew there was no use looking for him in that storm.

Colonel, now all alone, was fast getting numb, so that he could hardly move his legs any more. And he hardly cared, for soon the cold feeling began to leave him and he was beginning to feel warm, comfortable and sleepy. That was the first stage of freezing.

But for being sort of hardened to the steady cold, he would have froze where he stood. He would have anyway but he began to move a little with the wind, and that seeming to relieve him some, he moved on some more, slow at first but steadier as he went on. The storm kept him a-drifting the whole long night, he was sort of swept along. There was no stopping now until the storm did or he couldn't go no more.

It was near the middle of the next day when the storm finally sort of let up. Colonel could see, not so far ahead, a dark line of what looked like stock, and he moved on towards that line. It was cattle—cattle that had drifted until they couldn't drift further.

They'd come to a fence where, with humped backs, they lined up to wait for the end of the storm, and there was where Brad and another rider found Colonel that day, all humped up. But he showed a good spark of life as the sound of the surprised cowboy's voice came to his ears.

The prodigal had returned.

V

IT WAS still storming hard on the morning after Colonel's return to the ranch, but that blue blood didn't know it until the stable door was swung open and a gust of the cold wind hit him. The door was closed and then he heard Virginia's voice. Brad had told her that morning that a hat rack covered over with a horse hide had sneaked in there the night before and she'd ought to see about it.

She was nearly too happy and excited with Colonel's return to come back to the house and eat her breakfast. But she was calmed down some by her dad asking,

"What about Charro?"

Little Charro hadn't come to her mind. She couldn't think of anything else but Colonel. But, reminded of the little wild colt, it come sudden as to how strange he wasn't along too. Such close pals wouldn't separate, not unless it was something where one just couldn't follow the other. It would have to be something serious.

Her dad only grinned at her fears. "Don't worry about that little fuzztail," he says. "He didn't want to come back and be fussed over."

"I hope you're right, Dad," Virginia said, "but him and Colonel had so much fun playing together."

"Yeh, but he's with some bunch, somewhere, and some of the boys might run acrost him any time."

It stayed stormy and cold for a week after Colonel returned, then it cleared and got warmer and the boys got to making bigger circles from the ranch and camps. Brad and Red, riding together one day, rode onto three horses which had been pawing for feed on the sunny side of a foothill. It was the two renegades and little Charro.

Busy pawing, they didn't see the riders until they'd topped the foothill, but the riders hadn't seen them no sooner. Brad and Red was so surprised they just held their horses still and watched the three go. But they wasn't at all surprised to see how wild little Charro had got. He'd be near as hard to catch as the two renegades. But they figured that now was the time to get him, while the snow was deep, and before he'd get back to the wild horse range.

The riders didn't move until the wild ones got out of sight, then they started more up towards the mountains, for it was figured there's where they'd hit for. They didn't have to go much over a couple of miles when they spotted the three wild ones again, going at a walk. But at sight of the riders they started to run some more. Then's when the riders had the leverage on 'em for they was already above and it would take quite a bit of the wild ones' wind to get there and past 'em.

But they tried it and there was a lunging run of over a mile. Then the wild ones begin to crowd to get up in the mountains and the riders made their loops ready. Little Charro showed signs of being winded some, but he was game and wasn't far behind. The two riders spurted their horses on, and after a few seconds of scrambling in the deep snow, Brad's loop settled over Charro's head. Red made a throw at one of the renegades, but his loop fell short.

He didn't try no more, for Charro was the only one that was wanted, and now, as Brad's loop drawed around his neck that little feller went against it and squealed like a regular wild one. Brad only had to grin some as he let him fight for a spell.

"Now, little feller," he says, "that ain't no way for you to act. Do you forget the good treatment you had last winter and the pretty lady who took care of you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The first useless fighting spasm over, little Charro knew he was licked, and when Brad got off his horse and came towards him he hardly flinched. Brad slipped a hackamore over his head, and even though he wasn't broke to lead he soon enough seen he was to follow the way that rope pulled him. Besides, Red was riding close behind him and with a flip of the end of his rope on his rump would keep him from pulling back.

Late that night the two riders pulled into the ranch with their "prisoner" and put him in the box stall with the now well-fed and good-eating Colonel. Next morning, Charro recognized Virginia as quick as Colonel had, and now was as gentle as he'd been wild the morning before. Once tamed a wild horse seldom forgets, and even though he might get away, once caught again he'll soon come back to all that's been taught him. But he'll always get away every chance he gets. That's a natural instinct.

To Charro, not to be able to go where and when he pleased, to be faced by heavy log walls and corral bars was like being in prison. That sort of chafed, more now he'd had a good taste of the freedom.

SO THE winter wore on, kind of slow for Charro, and with the coming of spring there was more and more the restless feeling of roaming with him. He got to walking around the big corral like a lion in a cage, gazing at the greening hills, at the badland ridges, and he wouldn't eat much. There was no more play in him, and Virginia got to noticing that, and that he wouldn't follow her around like Colonel.

"That little feller is getting poor, too," Brad said to Virginia. "He ought to be picking up instead, with all the good feed you've been giving him."

"Maybe he will when I turn him and Colonel out to pasture," Virginia said. "It's grass he wants."

"It's them faraway hills he's hankering for"—Brad grinned—"and if I was you I'd add on a pole all around the top of the pasture fence or he might make a break."

So a string of peeled lodge-pine poles was strung and pegged along the top of the pasture fence. It was five foot high, and a fox-hunting horse could of easy cleared it, but not Charro.

When him and Colonel was turned out in that pasture the first place Charro hit for, on a high lope, was the gate where he'd got out the summer before. But it was of course closed. Then, sizing up the fence with top pole all around, he went to nibbling at the green grass. As the days went by and there was no sign of his wanting to break out, Virginia decided it was a good time to start to train and break Colonel to saddle.

Colonel was now a two-year-old when thoroughbreds was started in training, but what to start him at and for what purpose sort of had Virginia stumped. She didn't know anything about race horses and she didn't have any use for such either.

So she asked Brad. She still felt that Colonel was partly his, but Brad didn't feel that way.

"Well," he says, "I wouldn't know just what to suggest. He's your horse, and you better do with him as you see fit. If I was to suggest anything I'd most likely be wrong."

Virginia was set back quite a bit, and she could tell right away what had caused it. Then, with a queer little smile and a remark that she had to help Anne, Virginia started back for the house.

There was a kind of queer grin on Brad's face, too, as he watched her walk away. Then, looking at Colonel again, he said:

"It'll be all right, old boy—I hope. . . ."

As the spring work was now in full swing it was near a week before Brad and Red was at the ranch again. Pinned to the log wall by Brad's bunk, was the bill of sale he'd made to Virginia for Colonel. On the same sheet in her writing was:

I thank you but I don't want him.
Virginia

Red was laughing, and Brad laughed, too, but very little.

Virginia didn't come down to the pasture that evening. That night Brad added on a few words to her note, to the effect that he wouldn't want the colt either, not now, and that he was still all hers as far as he was concerned. He give it to Anne to give to Virginia before he started out on the next day's ride.

When Brad and Red and Jim hit out for the first rodeo of the year, Virginia told Brad how ashamed she was for the way she'd acted and that she'd again take care of the Colonel while he was gone. Then, Brad, thinking it would make her happy, told her to go ahead and start riding him, that he might surprise her and maybe take to working cattle better than might be expected.

Brad and the other cowboys was no more than gone, when Virginia was down in the pasture. As Colonel came to meet her she put a rope around his neck, and led him up to the corrals and stables. Colonel was kind and gentle, as always welcoming the touch of hand. There'd be no *breaking* of him to riding or for anything else wanted of him to be done, no bucking or fighting, no treacherous tricks for the rider to watch out for; only training and plain teaching. Whether Virginia would be on his back or on the ground beside him would be all the same to his nature.

Virginia was a mighty fair hand with range-bred horses, though she didn't profess to be a bronco buster, and she took much more time and pains with him than with the range-bred colts she'd broke. She gave him a good brushing and sort of slicked him all up, then slipped her saddle on him, as easy as though he'd been saddled many times before, and he didn't bat an eye. The bridle came next, over the hackamore that was already on his head. The bit was the only thing that bothered him, and he tried to work it out with his tongue but of course with no luck, and being it didn't hurt he soon enough got used to it.

That all done she tied up the hacka-

more rope and bridle reins to the saddle-horn and left him loose in the big corral to get used to the rigging and bridle by himself.

THE proceedings was about the same the next day, only not so long with just packing saddle and bridle, for then Virginia also eased herself into the saddle, and Colonel was some more interested, but not flustered. He stood still, like just wondering what to do, then she pulled on one bridle rein, turning his head, and with a light slap of the reins on the opposite side he moved the direction his head had been turned. She turned him on the other side, both sides that way a few times, then straight ahead or just around the corral.

Virginia didn't work on Colonel for much more than an hour that second day, and after a good brushing which he liked, along with a handful of grain, he was turned out in the pasture. Charro didn't like such goings on, for he sort of feared he might be next and that wouldn't go well with him.

On the third day Colonel was rode outside of the corral. That ride was so enjoyed by both the girl and the horse that there was none of it being done inside the corral no more. The colt's training went on for two or three hours every day or so. Then, gradually, Virginia started him on cow work, but though Colonel was plenty intelligent, willing, and cool-headed enough, he just didn't develop much heart for it. After a couple of months he hadn't learned as much as her cowhorses had in their first week of breaking.

He was about the same way with neckreining, where the horse is teached to turn by the touch of the rein on the side of his neck. All fast-turning horses like the cowhorse and polo pony are trained to that, and at all riding where the rider uses only one hand on the reins. But Virginia didn't think he'd ever be a well-reined horse.

Maybe he'd come to it, maybe just take more time. There was one good thing sure though, and that was how quick he could catch up to a bunch quitter without even *trying* to run, and what a calf-roping horse he'd make for rodeos! Virginia had shook a loop off of him a few times, but Colonel showed little interest. Then one day, while her dad was riding along with her, and coming to a good-sized fall calf in one of the herds, he told her to dab her rope on that one and see how the colt would act.

Virginia laughed, shaking out a loop. "But you'll have to heel it, because I don't believe I can bust the calf to lay. Colonel can't be handled well enough for that as yet."

The big strong calf lit into a run soon as he seen he was singled out, and Colonel, sensing that there'd be some new game to play lit after him like a streak —so much like a streak that the calf was passed before Virginia could make a fair aim with her loop. The calf dodged back behind the horse and was safe in the middle of the herd by the time she got Colonel stopped and turned.

Cal laughed. "Good thing you didn't catch that calf," he says, "because at the speed you went by him you might of jerked his head plumb off his shoulders. Let's try it again."

He rode into the herd and cut the calf out with good speed. Virginia, with loop ready, set Colonel after the calf once more. And this time, Virginia's loop speeded to reach over the calf's head and draw up around the neck just before Colonel had passed him. Now was the question to keep the colt from passing. But Colonel wasn't trained to roping, and there was no checking him until he hit the end of the rope. Then the heavy calf done the checking up, near jerking Colonel over backwards.

Colonel hadn't expected any such a jerk, but as he got his balance again, Virginia turned him and made him face the tight rope and the husky calf, now flat on his side. Knowing that Colonel hadn't as yet got wise to a rope, Cal had rode onto the calf and soon as the rope slackened he was off his saddle and took the rope off before that young one got his wind and could get up. And not any too soon, for the calf scrambled up as the rope grazed off his nose and, being on the peck, he butted the laughing Cal back up on his horse before he went back for the herd.

"Thought you said you couldn't bust that calf to lay." Cal laughed.

"Well—" Virginia laughed back— "it's a wonder Colonel didn't get jerked down too."

"A grown steer would of broke him in two," says Cal. "But if he could be made to stop soon as the calf is caught he'd sure be a top one, with that speed

of his. But I see he can't stand to have anything be ahead of him, when there's any running to be done."

"Maybe Brad could break him of that. Maybe one summer of rodeo calf roping would do it."

"He'd have to be trained a considerable out here before he'd be much good in a rodeo arena," Cal grunted. "And even then, I doubt if he'd take to it. That's not in his breeding." He scratched his head. "Virginia," he says, "this colt is a valuable horse, for his speed. What if he should ever get away again? He ought to be branded."

Virginia thought on that for a spell. "I don't see where it's necessary, on this range where everybody knows of him," she said. "Besides if anybody else got him we could always prove he's ours."

Cal grinned a little. "All right," he says, "but if he was mine there'd be my brand on him right quick. His kind may not be supposed to be branded, but I used to have many of his kind and, by japers, every one of them sure was branded. Yes, sirree, if I was you, I'd sure slap my iron on this colt before sundown this evening."

Virginia couldn't help but smile. "You seem to've taken quite a sudden interest in Colonel," she says.

"It's you I'm thinking of, the way you fretted and carried on the time he got away," he came back. "Virginia, you could use your mother's iron. It's a mighty neat little horse brand, goes on the left shoulder, and has been on as good as there could be in horseflesh. We called it the Comet, just a star with tails, like this"—he traced it on the palm of his hand—"and your mother would be mighty pleased you using her brand. It would please me too."

"I guess you win again, as usual, Dad," Virginia said. "But what about Charro? Are we going to brand him too?"

"Why, yes, I think we just as well. But I think I'll put one of my own irons on him."

VI

BRANDING of the colts—Colonel with the "comet" and Charro with an interlocking "CG"—was done just in time. For one morning, a week or so later, going into the pasture to get her saddle horses, Virginia couldn't see hide nor hair of either Colonel or Charro. Then seeing one of the new pole gates open, she didn't have to guess twice what had happened. Them two colts had hit out again.

But as she got the saddle horses in the corral and caught the one she wanted she found there was one of them missing. This was an old gray pensioner that hadn't been rode for years.

Virginia knew where he ranged, so she had hopes she'd soon catch up with the runaways. So sure was she of finding the colts with the gray that she didn't look even for their tracks but rode straight on for the gray's range. It didn't surprise her any when along near noon she seen the gray about a mile ahead of her, grazing along slow.

It didn't bother her none that she didn't see Colonel and Charro, for them two could be in some ravine. But as she rode nearer the gray she soon seen he was alone. The gray hit out cross-country like as if all tarnation was after him, and at a speed that would of bothered Virginia's horse to follow.

Virginia watched the old gray go, and her hopes at seeing the colts faded. For if they'd been anywheres close they'd of acted wild too, and followed him. They'd at least showed up to see what all he was running about.

Now she knew that the colts hadn't followed the gray far out from the ranch. There was only one thing to do and that was turn back and cut for their tracks, above where she figured they'd most likely left the gray. She picked up the tracks, but lost them again late in the day when she come to a deep waterhole where there was many other fresh tracks of horses that'd come to water. But she had the general direction of where they was headed when she turned back. She'd be on their trail again early the next morning.

It was away after dark when she got back to the ranch.

"That renegade gray, old White Cloud, is the one to blame for them gates being opened," Cal said. "I can tell his old pigeon-toed tracks easy, and I could see that he done a lot of stomping around the gate in studying ways to open it. I got to remembering how that old wise one used to sort of take pride in opening gates with all sort of different fixings on 'em and letting the stock out, even if he didn't care to go himself.

Yep, that old White Cloud is the culprit, but I don't know how he learned such freaky tricks. He never was no pet. He was born and raised in the hills."

Early the next morning Virginia rode out for the horse range, but though she rode far and wide she had to come back disappointed. She told Cal she was sure the colts was away into the badlands.

"That will help a considerable," he said. "And listen, young lady," he went on, pointing a finger at her. "I want you to stay home today and rest up. I'll relieve you of hunting for them colts, and if the way I do don't suit you, why, you can take up the trail where I left off. Now let your saddle rest and I'll be back tonight."

Anne and Virginia looked at one another, wondering. It was hardly daybreak, and they wondered some more when they heard the purr of his big car and, looking out the window, seen the headlights of it headed for the main road.

"Why," says Anne in surprise, "looks like he's going to town. That's not the direction the colts would be, and besides how would he catch 'em in a car."

Virginia only smiled. "He's not going after the colts, Anne," she said, "but you can be sure he's got some good scheme of getting 'em."

The womenfolk would of wondered plenty more if they'd seen Cal drive into the county seat, walk into the courthouse and plank down two thousand dollars bail to release one bewhiskered but smiling man from behind the bars of a cell. This small man, around thirty, was the well-known horse thief and mustang runner, "Blackie" Cooper. He'd been arrested a few weeks before for trying to ship branded horses not belonging to him along with some mustangs he'd caught. Now he was awaiting trial in the fall, and he had no friends he could call on for two thousand dollars bail. And then Cal come along.

BLACKIE had rode for Cal some years before, when Cal still had some of his racing stock, and they had thought a lot of one another. Then when Cal lost his horses, Blackie lost heart and went back to running wild ones. He worked for horse outfits in between times, but never for cow outfits, and there was one man Blackie rode for and never stole a horse from. That man was Cal, and Cal appreciated that. Now he was showing his appreciation.

There was no talk about that, though, as the two et a noon meal at a restaurant. The main talk was of Colonel, of the country where Colonel might be, and Cal learned that Blackie had been running horses in that same country only the year before, and to Cal's surprise, he gave him the description of Colonel and Charro. For Blackie was the mustang runner who that year before had caught the four young studs of the bunch Colonel and Charro had took up with. He was the one who'd marveled at Colonel's speed as the two broke away and had figured on getting Colonel and Charro the next day.

Well, that made it all easy—all but maybe the catching, and Blackie didn't seem to be worried about that. He'd have his two pardners move camp back near that range, and all he wanted was a saddle and a good horse till he got to his own, somebody to show him where at Colonel and Charro went into the badlands and he'd do the rest.

"Mr. Goodwin," Blackie busted out, "this is one time I'm going to be powerful happy doing something else along with running mustangs. . . ."

A month after Colonel and Charro had got away, a rider came to the Hip O Ranch one day, leading a saddled horse. The rider was Blackie.

"Well, I seen him," he told Cal. "Yep, I seen him quite a few times, but just streaks of him. Why man, it'd take the combined speed of two of the fastest horses in this country to get close enough for a good look at that brown colt. But I'm sure it was the one you call Colonel, and how that colt can run! He's still with the little grulla, and that little feller is sure no slouch either.

"We all three went after him time and again, used every scheme we knew but the wise little devil seemed to see through 'em all every time, the tall one was just having a lot of fun with us by making distance the way the little one pointed. And when we get a chance to crowd him towards a trap he's up and gone in a puff of dust."

"Some horse," grunted Cal. "Sure worth getting. But how do you aim to do that now, Blackie?"

"The same as I been doing. That's all can be done. But I thought I'd better let you know, and bring your horse and

saddle back. I had to use him some, and he's a little leg-weary."

"That's all right," says Cal. "How're you doing with the other wild ones? Catching many?"

"Pretty good," says Blackie. "What with staying on Colonel and Charro's trail mostly and trying to get them we've caught near enough now to make up two carloads."

"No more branded ones you can't answer for, is there?" asks Cal, grinning.

Blackie grinned back and said, "No, not for a while anyway."

"Now," Cal went on, "I noticed your own horse could also use some rest. Better leave him here too, and take a couple of mine. I've got plenty here that sure needs riding. . . ."

The next time Blackie rode into the Hip O was one day before the snows come. He hadn't given up hopes of catching Colonel, but he'd proved that when as good a mustang runner as he was had failed, there wasn't much use of any others trying. Virginia admired Blackie for being so true with his word. He'd returned in good time for Cal to take him back to the county seat and to stand trial in a case where he'd be most sure to be convicted.

Cal stood by him during the trial, but Blackie was sent up for from two to fourteen years. But the months of freedom that Cal was responsible for done much more to turn Blackie against being careless with others' stock than the prison sentence ever could.

UP IN the badlands, meanwhile, Colonel was "the king of all he surveyed" when it come to speed, and he knew it. When that fall come he didn't no more think of the ranch, the warm stable and good hay there. That had got to be as distant as the bluegrass meadows where he was born.

Colonel and Charro drifted to a lower range for that winter, where there was more grass and less snow, and they joined a small bunch for company. The stud of that bunch hadn't put up much of a fight. He was a kind of a good-natured jughead and it was a wonder how he'd got a hold of his harem of mares and fillies, or how come some other stud hadn't taken 'em away from him. Anyway Colonel and Charro didn't raise no ruckus, and when some fighting stud would come out to challenge there'd be three to meet him, and he'd usually turn back again.

In all the drifting Colonel and Charro hadn't come acrost either of the two renegade saddle horses they'd run with the fall before. And then one day the two renegades did show up. When the stud spotted 'em and started out to meet 'em, Charro and Colonel followed.

The palaver was short, no trouble, and the colts renewed their acquaintance with the geldings which tagged along with the bunch. It was now a sort of mixed-up harem the old stud had, but with the added wisdom of the two renegades, it would of took some powerful outside stud to've tried to take away any of the mares or fillies out of *that* bunch.

Then one day there come a fiery young stud. He had a nice little bunch of mares, and he'd fought hard to whip the stud that'd had 'em. The sleepy-acting old stud watched the showy younger one come for a ways, then he shook his heavy-maned neck and trotted out to meet him. The colts and renegades tagged along, more like to watch the fun then to join in the battle. The mares just watched.

It seems like there's no age limit as to a wild stallion's strength and fighting ability. The older they get the more dangerous they are, and this good-natured acting older stud showed the marks of many battles. He'd learned that no matter how good he might be there was always some still better. That the younger stallion hadn't as yet learned.

The two stallions clashed, and there was no clinching afterwards. The younger one came on with knees up and forward, like a man might use his elbows. The older one came on, head up, but he of a sudden wasn't there when the young one rushed. His knees couldn't find him. Instead he found himself lifted off the ground, then a sharp pain of tearing hide along his flank, and before the younger one had slid on past him and got his balance that older one fastened his powerful jaws on the back of the younger one's neck, paralyzing and dazing him.

The fight didn't last long after that. Quicker than the eye the older one switched holts, to the back of his jaw and at his throat. It was a wonder he didn't rip it wide open, and all that saved

the younger stallion there was that he went down, out of wind. The older one stomped him on the neck a couple of times, dazing him, and showed no more interest in him after that. He let out a snorting nicker of victory, then his attention went to the younger stud's mares.

The mares was hazed past their fallen ruler to join the victor's bunch. The younger cocksure warrior had lost all instead of acquiring more, besides being badly chewed and gashed up.

So there was a fair-sized bunch when spring come, with bunch grass greening up on the hillsides and hollows. While enjoying this peace and plenty one day a tornado, in the shape of a regular devil horse, hit the bunch with no warning, and scattered it from there to yonder. The old stud had been the first bowled over, the two renegades lost some hide in getting away, and Colonel and Charro had been wise enough to skedaddle away quick.

The mares was slam-banged into a quick run, hazed over a ridge and out of sight. That devil horse must of been part thunderbolt as well as tornado the way he was everywhere at once and done his work so quick and smooth. The old stud was standing and just looking around some, like he was wondering what had happened, but seemed none the worse for what did happen. It had been too sudden.

And now there was only five of 'em left, including Colonel and Charro, when they got together again and begin drifting. The old stud lagged behind, like he wasn't satisfied to be with only geldings and colts, but would rather be alone for a spell. But he did graze with 'em for a spell, until night come, then he started out alone.

He'd ramble on for maybe weeks. By that time he'd be on his summer range, where few mustangers ever bothered him, and there he'd in time find a likely bunch with a stud he could whip, then all would be at peace again, excepting for as usual watching out for things a wild stallion has to steady keep watch for.

COLONEL had taken on responsibility in the trim shape of a two-year-old filly. He didn't have to fight no stud to get her and he didn't steal her. She'd just come along, like lost, and he'd appropriated her. She'd right away went to grazing and running close by his side and plumb contented.

It had been love at first sight, and now for fear of losing her and through pure jealousy, he kept her away from Charro and them other two wise ones. He'd of course once in a while glance towards his pardners and follow wherever they went, for he didn't want to lose track of them either. But him and his lady love would keep a mile or so away from them, even in the rough country.

Then, after a couple of weeks of such bliss, there come a rider who spotted Charro and the two renegades, and a mile away from them was two more horses. The rider leveled his field glasses on them, and a pleased grin spread over his face. Then a puzzled expression come, for he couldn't figure out that brown being apart from the grulla and with a sorrel instead.

Then it all come to him as plain as day, and he couldn't of wished for anything to be more in his favor than they was. Knowing horses, especially the brown and the grulla, he knew that the two colts had separated and the reason why, also that the brown still didn't want to be too far from the grulla.

That's what he'd work on, he decided, and he'd have to work it just right or this good chance would be spoiled. Sizing up the country, the rider seen where luck was with him some more, for in the mile space between the two bunches was a couple of long ridges high enough to block the view from one to the other.

The distance to the horses was covered mighty careful and quiet, and when the rider figured he was between the two bunches he rode to the side of one of the benches so he could look over it, not showing himself. He spotted the three he wanted to spook away and spurted up to their full sight sudden, like him and his horse had just shot up from the earth. The three just up and went, like the devil was on their tail, for rough foothills and rougher country above.

The rider watched 'em go, then rode the opposite direction to where the other two had been. Now would be the real ticklish work, depending a whole lot on the sorrel. He knew the brown would make a dash for where he figured Charro and the other two to be, and finding them gone he'd be pretty well

confused as to where to go. Then would be the time to get 'em going towards some of the blind traps which the country was full of. He could tell better which way to head 'em after he seen how the sorrel acted. The thing to do was to ride towards 'em slow and not spook 'em any more than possible. Let 'em take their own course for a spell, then he'd know how to run 'em.

As he slowly rode up on the two and stopped his horse they raised their heads, stood like petrified for a second, then the brown started into a loping lead, the sorrel following. The rider didn't make no effort to turn 'em any direction. He just poked along while the brown led in a circle to get to the bunch of three. And when the brown come to where he'd last seen his pardners and there was no sign of 'em nowheres he liked to went wild, nickering, running from ridge to ridge looking for 'em. But them three was miles away from there by then. So the brown was mighty confused, and the filly just sort of stood in one place, watching.

The rider had got off his horse on a high knoll, and from there he seen that again luck was sure with him, for that sorrell filly was not a wild one but as gentle breeding as the brown was. The brown wouldn't leave her, and the two could be driven right wherever wished. The filly wouldn't run from a rider, and soon as the brown cooled down some they'd be no trouble.

And there was no trouble, only four days of steady riding and two nights' stops. On the fourth day come sight of the Hip O Ranch when the brown, Colonel, perked his ears and again stretched out on his head, this time only to a good steady walk towards it.

* * * * *

THERE would be a couple of weeks before Brad would be hitting out with the rodeo stock. There was still plenty of riding to be done in the meantime, and one day, while riding near the ranch, Virginia rode up alongside of him. She was riding Colonel.

Brad says to her, "You've rode this colt enough so's to know if he has the natural knack it takes to make a cowhorse. Do you think he has the makings to match any in your string?"

Virginia smiled. "Why, no," she says. "He goes by a cow so fast he never sees her, and if one would ever happen to be in his way I'm sure he'd run right over her. No, as a cowhorse he'll never do, but as for speed he would make a jack-rabbit ashamed of itself."

"The first rodeo I have on hand is only a couple of hundred miles away," Brad said. Why not let's take Colonel and try him in a race there?"

"It would be all right, I guess," says Virginia. "But who's going to ride him?"

Brad smiled at her again and said, "You are."

VII

GOING on between the events of bronc riding, steer riding, bull-dogging, and so on, there were three races at that rodeo. Virginia and Colonel was up for the third race, and Brad led Colonel on the track and put him in his starting place. That eased Virginia a considerable, for she had never rode in a race before.

Neither had Colonel, and one of the main things with him would be the start. But as the starter gave the sign, Brad like a flash slapped Colonel on the rump, and with the other horses starting on both sides, Colonel was only half a length behind.

Then the fun began. Colonel kept abreast of some of the leaders for a spell, like as if to find out if they could run with him. Then when two riders sort of shouldered against his neck and tried to pinch him out, he got in the clear on the outside of 'em and left the riders like they was riding hobbled horses. Favorites and well-known horses was passed in the same way, and when he crossed the line there was enough horse lengths behind him to call it a herd.

Cal's old racing spirit revived as he watched Colonel. He was hard to hold down for a spell, and when Brad got to tell him there was another rodeo a few weeks off, Cal bounced up and says:

"Me and Virginia'll sure be there. We'll drive, and I'll bring that horse trailer to put Colonel in."

At this second rodeo, Colonel outdistanced the other horses even more than before, for now he'd learned to be ready from the start.

There was no more tickled girl than Virginia after so easy winning the second race, but near as sad a girl when Cal said it was time to hit back home

for the ranch. The next rodeo was five hundred miles away, and Brad would take Colonel with him. Brad had forgot that Colonel was Virginia's horse. He'd have to ask her permission to take him, of course.

The three walked to the hotel, where Cal hit downstairs for the bar.

Brad said to Virginia:

"These rodeos I've got from now on are quite some distance away and far apart. You and your dad couldn't very well follow them, and I would sure like to take Colonel along. You can bet your boots he'll get the best of care and the best of riders. You've seen how the track is in his blood, also found out he'd never be a cowhorse. With his speed there'd be some great winnings made at every rodeo, also outside races. I'll do the handling of him and split the winnings with you."

Virginia only stared at the floor as he spoke. Brad knew she didn't want to part with Colonel, even if only for the summer, and he also knew she didn't give a whoop for the winnings. There was something else in her expression which was away beyond him to understand. If she would only speak.

"If you don't feel right about only half the winnings," Brad begins, "I'll give you all and keep only—"

She turned her face at him, and her large expressive moist eyes told what he already knew, but what did surprise him was that they told she knew how he himself cared for her but didn't speak.

Some time afterwards the door flew open and old Cal, feeling pretty good, caught the two sitting close, arms around each other, hands clasped and heads together.

Cal stared, then a pleased grin spread over his face.

"I knew it," he says. "I knew it would happen soon as my back was turned, and I turned it a-purpose. God bless you both, and I wish you all the happiness you two sure enough deserve. . . ."

Along about middle winter Cal, who'd been having race track news sent to him, perked up at one report. It was of a big race that was to be pulled off acrost the mountains. The stake was for fifty thousand dollars. And amongst them who entered some horses was a Morgan Mansfield.

Cal let out a warwhoop, hunted up Brad and, pointing a finger at the name, could hardly speak for excitement.

"There's an old enemy of mine," he says. "He crooked me out of two races, but we're going to take in that race, and with Colonel we'll skin him out of his pants."

It was hard for Brad to keep his mouth shut at what Cal was aiming to do to him. The race would be for four-year-olds. Mansfield had entered two, and it came to Brad that they would be Colonel's half-brothers.

"What are you going to do for a jockey?" he asked. "There's no lady jockeys in such races."

This jockey matter was serious, and Cal paced the floor some that evening and wrinkled his brows. Then it came to him. He telephoned the State Prison. There was a long confab between him and the warden, and when it was over there was a satisfied look on Cal's face.

IT WOULD be about three months before the big race. A jockey should get acquainted with the horse he's to ride and the horse acquainted with him. So a month before the race, Cal drove to the State Prison, and after a spell a grinning little feller bearing a number was shaking hands with Cal. It was Blackie.

"Well, Blackie," the Warden says. "I'm going to let you go on your honor and in charge of our friend Cal Goodwin here. I know you won't break that trust." The warden smiled at him. "I'm betting on you and on a good horse, to win. If you win, or even if you don't but try, I'll see what I can do about a parole when you get back."

There was no happier or grateful a half-pint-size cowboy than Blackie as Cal drove him out to the ranch.

There was a week or so of light training at the ranch, then Colonel was loaded into Cal's best horse trailer. The track was finally reached, a good big stall located and there Blackie made camp. Cal brought him his meals, and with his six-shooter kept handy he et and slept right by Colonel.

Cal run Mansfield down and Mansfield, remarking how Cal was sure a glutton for punishment covered all he wanted to bet, paying five to one to Cal's favor if he won.

The day of the race finally come, and Cal was on the job early.

"We got to win this race, Blackie,"

Cal said, "for many more reasons than one."

Blackie just grinned, confident, like as to say it was already the same as won.

Colonel started fairly good this time, only half a length behind the two horses on each side of him. But them two was a couple of crazy ones that started out so fast they thought they had wings and forgot to use their legs, and about five lengths from the starting line they rammed against one another and piled up right in front of Colonel. Cool-headed Colonel tried to jump the mix-up but he was too close, and he upended right on top of 'em.

A cloud of dust was stirred by the scrambling hoofs, and Cal could see the Mansfield ponies in the clear and hitting out. There come a heavy slap on his back and a roaring, laughing voice saying:

"There goes your money, Cal old boy."

But the race was still young. Colonel, which had fell in the heap, got up a-running, with Blackie out of the saddle but right into it again, and on with the race horse and rider went, leaving the other two riderless horses still scrambling to their feet. Blackie stuck his nose in Colonel's mane, and says,

"Come on, son! Let's head 'em off."

Mansfield scrambled up the judge's stand, Cal right on his heels, and by the time they got up there the first lap was near over and Colonel had headed off many lengths separating him from the Mansfield horses. In fact there was only one length to their tail, and there was still another lap to go. Then as the shadow of the dark horse crowded up on 'em their speed begin to be used up. They went to their level best but it didn't seem to be of no use. That shadow kept a-crowding up on 'em, then the Mansfield jockeys begin using their whips. Blackie didn't have nor want no whip.

The two Mansfield horses was still nose to nose as the shadow crept to the shoulder point, and there was still a hundred yards to go.

"Let's go now, cowboy!" Blackie whispered. And that range-trained thoroughbred spurted up as though he hadn't yet tried to run.

When the finishing line was reached he was two lengths ahead of the Mansfield horses, the best of his own half-brothers. And when Cal showed Mansfield the bill of sale Brad had given him just before leaving the ranch, Mansfield sure was mortified. For it showed Colonel was a colt from Montezuma. He remembered then the little colt he'd ordered sold on account he was off color. . . .

As they drove back along the smooth highway, Blackie begin to notice signs advertising a rodeo. They would reach that town the next day and the contest wasn't to start until the day after that.

"Want to see it?" Cal asked, with a grin.

"I sure would like to," says Blackie, "and more than that, I want to contest in it."

Cal rubbed his chin for a spell. "Well," he says, "I'm sure the warden won't care. Let's whoop 'er up. We both ought to celebrate some."

On arriving in the rodeo town Blackie entered the saddle bronc riding contest. He didn't enter any other contest.

Blackie rode in the tryouts on a good tough horse and qualified for the semi-finals. He done as well in the semi-finals and qualified for the finals. There was a couple of days' waiting between each ride, then the last day of the rodeo come. He made the finals in good shape, and now, him and only six other boys was up for the grand finals.

When Blackie's name was called he climbed down the bucking chute and into the saddle, on top of a grand final horse, the pick of the roughest.

THE horse was a little dirty gray, and when the gate opened he started bucking right in the chute. Some of the boys spooked the little gray out of the chute. He was a spinning bucker, about the hardest kind to ride but this one, instead of just spinning, every hard and quick jump he landed was a spin-back, no forward-bucking jump. The little gray after leaving the chute, didn't cover much more than ten feet of ground in his bucking, but what all he done in that small space made even the watchers' heads swim.

The judge's whistle blew, calling it a ride, the pick-up man rode up, but the little gray was still at it, and whirling so fast that he couldn't get to reach the bucking rein. Then everything of a sudden got hazy for Blackie and the next thing he knew he was down to good

solid old Mother Earth. Cal was the first one to him, but Blackie was right up on his feet, though considerable dizzy. He turned to Cal and says:

"I want to take a look at that horse."

He started acrost the arena to the corral and Cal went with him. The two had nothing to go by excepting the color of the horse, and they got little chance to see that. The pick-up man came in with another horse and Blackie asked him. "Which horse did I just ride, or ride at?"

The pick-up man laughed and pointed him out. Blackie squinted at the little dirty gray, then turning to Cal, he says:

"Do you see what I see?"

Cal hardly dared believe his eyes. "It can't be Charro, can it?"

"It sure can, and is," says Blackie.

The last grand final ride over, Blackie had the pick-up man rope the little gray.

"Haze him to the chute, will you?" he says. "I want to get a close look at that iron on him."

In the chute the iron was looked over. It was a clear alteration of an interlocked C.G. There was no doubt but that the horse had been stolen and Cal's aim now was to lay his claim on him. He headed for the headquarters, Blackie right beside him, on the prod.

But the prod was took out of 'em as they entered the offices, for as Blackie showed his fizog he was presented with a silver- and gold-flowered trophy about his arm's length. At the same time, judges and all being there, he was acclaimed the champion bronc rider.

The stock promoter for the rodeo was at another desk, getting his money. Cal come straight to him and says:

"Mister, you have a horse in your bucking string that don't belong to you."

This gentleman took that kind of easy. "So?" he said. "What horse is it?"

"You call him Cream Puff in your string," says Cal, "but my name for him is Charro, and I've got my iron on him to prove it. And you know there's quite some penalty for anyone who buys stolen stock."

The gentleman stopped counting his money. "Are you accusing me of buying stolen stock when I know they're stolen?" he asks.

"Well," says Cal, "I'm not in the habit of accusing anybody in any way, but it would behoove you well to turn that horse horse back to whoever owns him. That's me."

"What proof have you got he's yours?" says the gentleman.

Cal had to laugh. "You can read brands, I know. And you could see through that brand that it was originally C.G. Any stock inspector here or anywhere can see that, and besides I've got a witness right here to prove he's my horse."

There was no more argument. That feller was glad to just keep on counting his money, before he said, "Take him away."

"And I don't need no bill of sale either," Cal answers back.

In a short time the bucking gray was loaded in the trailer, right alongside of his old pardner, Colonel. He fought and snorted some before getting in the trailer but soon as he got alongside of Colonel he drawed a long breath of ease.

Cal, glancing at Blackie as he drove, remarked, "That trophy of yours, Blackie—"

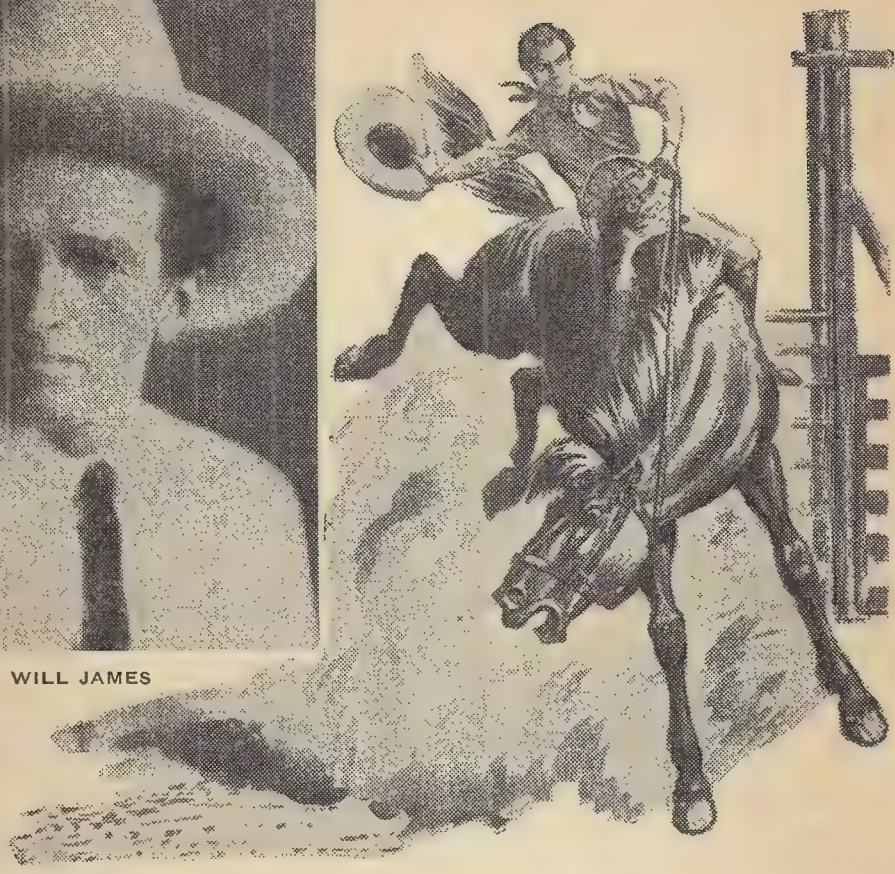
"Yes," says Blackie.

"Well," Cal went on, "it means a lot more than just that. The square and good way you done it in the race and rodeo, why, I know that all is near as effective as if the warden himself opened the gate. Me and him'll see to that."

As the two talked there was two ponies back of 'em shoulder to shoulder and bracing one another while the car wheeled 'em around the mountain curves. There didn't need to be no talk with them two. They'd always be all for each other, and masters at their own different games.

THE TOMBSTONE TRAIL, a novel by W. C. Tuttle, and THE MIRACULOUS FRONTIERSMAN, the true story of Buffalo Bill, by Jackson Cole, featured in April GIANT WESTERN—now on sale, 25c at all stands!

WILL JAMES



WILL JAMES,

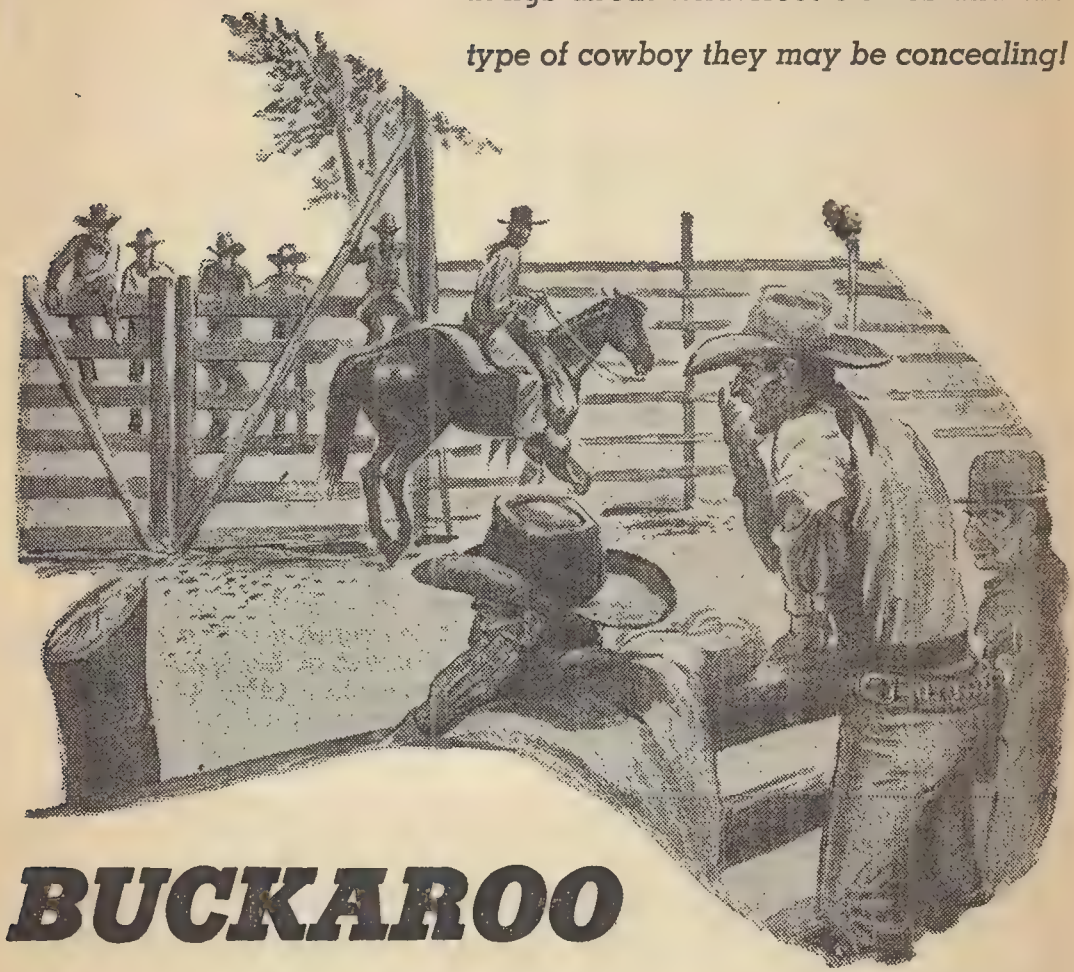
THE first time I saw Will James was at Wolf Creek, Montana, a little cow town on the Missouri River, not far from Great Falls. Back in those days it was plenty wild, and was made up of a general store, a saloon or two, dance-hall and a cluster of weather beaten dwellings. The town was wide open and full of tin-horn gamblers and dance hall girls, whose main ambition in life was to separate the world from a living without getting their hands dirty.

The night this story opens Kage Johnson and I were killing a little time at a table in a corner of the Silver Dollar. It was right after payday and the games and dance-hall girls were going full blast. Cowboy's, sheepherders, quarry men and railroaders were three deep in front of the long bar. Most of the bunch were plenty drunk or getting that way fast. Fist fights between cowboys and sheepherders were about ten minutes apart.

Mail-Order Cowboy

While we chatted the local from Great Falls whistled into the station and about fifteen minutes later the swinging doors opened, a young fellow pushed his way

He taught the folks in Wolf Creek a few things about tenderfoot clothes and the type of cowboy they may be concealing!



BUCKAROO

by JOHN EDWARD DALTON

into the bar. He was an eye full. All rigged out in the cheapest kind of mail-order clothes. What they lacked in quality they made up in flash. The fifteen gallon hat was so big it just about filled the bar. The shirt was red and yellow. The pants were white and skin tight. Back East the outfit would have passed for sure-enough cowboy duds, but in Wolf Creek you couldn't have gotten a cowhand inside them drunk or sober, without a gun.

Kage's eyes twinkled as he gave the stranger the once-over.

"They must be running excursions from the East to the wild-and-woolly West," he said with a laugh.

"He's sure enough a sight for sore eyes," I admitted, but as I gave the kid a closer scrutiny I noticed a couple of things that didn't go with the rest of his outfit. His boots were shop-made and the counters were broken down from carrying heavy spurs. The other thing that puzzled me, the stranger sported the prettiest pair of saddle-

warped legs I ever saw, and the bow in them legs wasn't caused by walking too young.

Now he might have bought the boots off a broke cowboy, but he couldn't buy the saddle-warped legs. You got them only one way, hours and days and years in the saddle. The kid didn't look like a hand—and yet?

Bull Spots a Victim

"Bull" Ferdenand, a two hundred and fifty pound fist-fighting bully saw the stranger almost before he was through the swinging doors. He blinked his eyes a time or two, then with a roar of welcome you could have heard a mile, rushed over and shook the kid's hand.

"Welcome, Pilgrim," he yelled. "Welcome to the Silver Dollar."

Then he dragged the kid up to the bar bellowing for 40-rod and informing the gang that the stranger was a long lost pardner from the wide open spaces.

You should have seen the stranger's face light up with a happy smile.

"Set 'em up," he shouted to the bartender. "Set 'em up for the house. Panther milk for mine." That put the kid in good standing with the gang. Anyone who bought drinks was o.k. with the bar flies.

Kage looked across the table at me. His eyes were troubled.

"I don't like it," he said. "If Bull gets salty, the kid is in for a rough time."

Trouble Looms

I nodded but didn't answer. I could have named a lot of men I liked better than Bull. In fact I couldn't think of any I liked less. So I loosened my irons in their Sam Myers and decided that if Bull got too untamed, I'd draw my cards in the game. And with Bull not liking me any more than I liked him, he was sure to call my play with a pair of sixes, and one of us was going to get a handful of flowers he couldn't smell.

Kage's eyes grew troubled when he saw me loosen my guns, but like the good pal he was, said:

"You better go slow, pardner, 'cause it'll be you and I against the gang. We ain't popular here and there ain't a buzzard in the Silver Dollar that won't side with Bull." Then after a long second he added, "But if you get to play the Good Samaritan, I'm with you 'till hell freezes over and we skate home on the ice."

"Thanks." I replied. "Maybe I'm borrowing trouble. The gang may just be looking for a good laugh." As an afterthought I added, "It wouldn't surprise me none if the kid done the last laughing."

Kage looked surprised but didn't answer. He didn't have the eye for detail I had. He hadn't noticed the shop made boots with the spur marks and the saddle warped legs.

Kid Keeps Treating

The night wore on towards morning. The kid kept buying round after round of 40-rod and telling the gang what a salty hand he was.

"I'm the best doggone bronc stomper in Montana," he bragged. "Look at my legs if you don't believe it. I can ride anything that ever ate grass. Ride 'em straight up too. You short-horns got anything that can kettle, lead him out an' I'll knock hair off his shoulders every jump. Bet my good old dough I can!"

The kid was weaving a little on his feet and the gang thought it was the panther milk talking. But they were wrong. He pulled a roll of bills out of the hip pocket of his fancy pants big enough to choke a winter-poor steer.

"Get your money where you got your mouth, boys. Let's see you gamble."

It didn't take the tin-horns long to cover the kid's roll. They just about fell over each other getting their bets down.

"Black-Jack" Tanney, Wolf Creek's boss gambler, touched the kid on the shoulder.

"Now that we got the money end settled, let's look up a bucking horse. There isn't a good one in town but Tom Miner has always got a few in the pasture out at his spread. Suppose we go out there as soon as it gets light?"

"Suits me," replied the stranger. "Yip-pee! The higher they buck the better I like 'em. I'm wild an' woolly an' full of fleas, an' hard to curry below the knees."

"You talk too much for a bronc rider," said Black Jack shortly.

One-Hand Roller, Too!

Kage rolled a quirley with one-hand and struck a match on his thumb nail. Blowing a cloud of smoke towards the bar, he said:

"I reckon Tanney's right," he said.

"The tenderfoot's going to need some eating money tomorrow. I'll bet you the drinks he don't last five jumps."

"You're on," I replied, "It's a good bet even if I lose."

At the first crack of dawn most of the town saddled up and hit across the flats to the Miner spread. Tom and his hands were just getting up from breakfast when we loped up.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. "Are the Injuns on the warpath?" He sure laughed when Black Jack Tanney told him about the bets. "Light and rest your saddles," he boomed, "I got just the horse you want. He ain't never been saddled, but for my money, he'll be a bucker from who laid the chunk. It'll take a salty dog to ride him out. No tenderfoot will ever get the job done. He's down in the corral. Let's go look him over."

Old Tom, Klondike, Eat-'em-up, Jake and I clambered up on the fence and perched ourselves on the top rail like a bunch of crows and looked over the milling horses below.

A Giant Cayuse

There was a rangy roan stud in the band. He must have weighed at least twelve hundred. He was a powerful-looking bronc, had a small head, pin ears and one glass eye. The big roan was battle-scarred from withers to hips from battles with other range studs.

Klondike said he hadn't been corralled for five years and that he'd run with a wild bunch high up in the roughest breaks on the hump of Sugar Loaf Mountain.

He said that it was only by the wildest riding and the best of luck that they had penned him this time.

"You ready to ride?" Tom asked the kid. "What did you say your name was?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," replied the kid, "and the name is Will James, from the Judith Basin."

Kage Johnson cut in, "Listen kid—if you ain't a bronc rider from the forks of Bitter Creek, you better skin back your brags, pay off the bets, and go to work. That stud is a killer or I'm a Chinaman."

"I am a bronc rider," answered Will, "and right now I am ready to prove it. Let's get him saddled. Time's a wasting."

Mean Fighter—That Roan

It took five of us to cut the roan into the round riding corral. There wasn't any run in that stud. He was plumb ready to fight anything in sight. Three times he put us out of the corral snapping at the seats of our pants. Then Klondike dropped into the corral from one side and Tim Miner from the other. The roan took after Klondike and Tom snared him by the front feet.

He went down fighting and squealing. Eat-'em-Up and I lit on his neck and turned his nose up to the sky. He did his best to bite but we were plenty careful.

Tom Miner hog-tied the stud then the kid slipped a hackmore over his pin ears, took a half hitch or two around the bosal (hackamore noseband). A couple of cowboys worked a throw-rope under his side to just back of the withers, tied one end of the rope to the kid's cinch ring and pulled the saddle snug up against the roan's back and cinched it there to stay.

Will James unbuckled his pants belt so in case it got caught over the horn he'd have a chance to come clear. He spread his stirrups, one on the ground and the other on the upper side of the stud, one hackamore rein under the stud's neck and the other on top.

The kid stood over the outlaw, reins in one hand, hat in the other and nodded to Tom Miner.

"Let him up an' we'll soon see if I am a buckaroo."

My, What a Bucker!

The rancher jerked the ropes and beat it for the fence. The stud came to his feet like a rocket with Will in the saddle. He stood still a second and then blew the plug. *How* that horse bucked! The kid sat him like he was part of the saddle, raking him jump for jump with both feet. The stud saw red. He was fighting to kill, not simply buck off his rider and run, but to trample him into the powdered dung underfoot.

I can close my eyes and see that man-killing-stud yet and the smiling kid on his back. As the horse bucked round and round the corral, he tried every trick known to horse, to slip his pack, but Bill was riding him like a cowboy, scratching from shoulder to cantle board, jump for jump. It was the great-

est bronc ride I ever say.

The big roan's jumps gradually let up and he trotted around and around the corral, head up. Klondike opened the corral gate and turned them out into the big pasture. Will James spent the rest of the day teaching him to turn and stop. The stud turned the crank a time or two more that day, but he never bucked as hard as he did in the corral.

They tied him up to the fence that night and let him halter break himself. He kept the ranch awake all that night trying to tear down the fence but it and the rope were stout and the next morning the stud, his nose too sore to fight, was led over to the water trough and drank.

James Trains Him

The next morning Will went to work for Tim Miner and took the stud in his string, rode him every chance he got and made a great cow horse out of him. The stud was a natural pacer and the mile eatenest horse I ever saw.

Tom Miner told me that Will James was one of the best all-around cowboys he ever worked with.

When the tin-horns saw the kid stamping out the outlaw roan and the bets they thought were a cinch being lost, they threw a wall-eyed fit.

"He's a crook," they yelled. "Made believe he wasn't a bronc rider. Acted like he was drunk, so he could take our money away from us. We ought to ride him out of Wolf Creek on a rail!"

If it hadn't been for Tom Miner, Kage Johnson, Eat-'em-Up, Jake and I, the tin-horns, led by Bull Ferdenand, would have given Will James a mighty rough time. So after a lot of threats and attempts to welch the bets, they mounted their broncs and headed back for the town on the Missouri River, a mighty sick bunch of short sports.

James Does Some Explaining

Here's the way Will James told us the story at the supper table.

"I come through Wolf Creek a few years ago when I was just a button and hardly dry behind the ears. I'd been night hawking for a spread near Cascade and had saved up a couple of hundred dollars. Well, the Wolf Creek tin-horns got me into a poker game and cold-decked me out of my road-stake, riding outfit, mount and bedroll. I caught a freight out of town and made up my mind as I dodged cinders and ate smoke in an open gondola, that I'd come back to Wolf Creek some day and get my money back."

He drew a deep sigh.

"Well, I reckon I kept my word," concluded Will James. "Now I'm going to shed these tenderfoot clothes and dress like a cowboy."

GOOD NEWS FOR WILL JAMES FANS!

If you enjoyed "The Dark Horse," the Will James novel in this issue, look forward to our next Will James epic of the plains—a stirring, whimsical saga of a tenderfoot and a magnificent black stallion!

SAND

WATCH FOR IT—IN A FORTHCOMING ISSUE!

The RETURN of NEVADA JORDAN

Jordan made a lightning draw

By BURL TUTTLE

"NEVADA" Jordan stood over the grave with head bowed, but his steel-gray eyes flamed under bushy brows. The glance that he at last turned on the men watching beyond the fence around that Boot Hill cemetery was steeped with all the bitterness of a man who hated well.

His brother Jim, shot to death by a bounty-hunting sheriff who did all the dirty work for the Triangle T combine, lay buried under that freshly covered mound.

Range-garbed men stood aside respectfully when Nevada Jordan turned away from the grave. Stoop-shouldered and loose-jointed, he moved on, speaking to no one. Somebody behind him stifled a gasp.

Nevada Jordan stepped onto the boardwalk and moved along the street. He, too, had been outlawed and chased from the country by the combine a year before. Perhaps Sheriff Tole Latimer would show up to collect the bounty money on his head. They had called him a rustler when this thing started. He had killed the gun-slick deputy sent by

AN OUTLAWED HOMBRE MAKES A DESPERATE PLAY FOR JUSTICE

the combine to smoke him down on the pretext of arresting him, and they had called it murder! A man couldn't win against such a setup. Nevada Jordan had refused to run so a hired killer had been sent to tally him for Boot Hill.

Up the street, Nevada saw "Red" Kenny, a runty, waddle-legged gunman, one of the hired killers on the combine payroll. Kenny hurried across the street and darted into the bank. Nevada knew he was on his way to inform Greg Stillwell that Nevada Jordan was back in town.

"Reckon I'll have a little talk with that banker-man," Nevada told himself.

When he reached the saddle shop, a grizzled oldster stepped out quickly and said, "Howdy, Nevada. Some of us are shore glad to see you back again."

Nevada Jordan stopped. "Howdy, Dan," he said with a tight smile.

The old saddlemaker clutched Jordan's arm. "Yuh ain't got a chance with that combine gang, Nevada. They'll kill yuh like they did Jim. They've got all Jim's cattle now. With you dead, they'll take over the ranch he hung onto for yuh."

"I'll have to take that chance, Dan. I aim to make this range a place for decent people to live or go out tryin'. First, I want to have a showdown with Stillwell." Jordan straightened his shoulders and started to move on.

"Wait! Nevada."

SOMETHING in the old saddlemaker's voice caused Nevada to hesitate. He waited for Dan to continue.

Old Dan Camp looked earnestly into the taller man's granite-like features.

"Nevada, some of us knew a year ago that the combine was a nest of snakes and that Latimer was doin' their dirty work for 'em. We knowed you was framed, but they was too much for us at the time. Greg Stillwell—"

Nevada stiffened at the mention of the banker's name, and Camp's fingers tightened on his sleeve.

"Hold it! Stillwell cut their sign right after you left. He played along, hopin' that crooked lawdog would tip his hand. Go talk to Greg Stillwell, Nevada, but keep yore gun holstered until yuh flush the king snake out."

"Obliged to yuh, Dan." Nevada Jordan said softly, then continued his slow, measured stride, leaving the old man looking after him.

As he passed the eating house, Jordan caught the flash of a gun-barrel in the sunlight between the restaurant and the bank. There, a deputy's badge flashing on his vest, stood Red Kenny—a killer turned lawman!

"Heist 'em, Jordan!" Kenny shouted.

That roaring challenge was for show, to make the killing look legal. The deputy's gun thundered. A bullet cut a groove along the fleshy part of Nevada's left arm. Jordan made a lightning draw and triggered a shot just above the badge over the killer's heart. When the smoke cleared away Red Kenny was lying in the street, a spreading spot of crimson on his shirt front.

Without a backward glance, Nevada Jordan moved on toward the bank, feeling the awed stares of men on his back. He knew he was but one man, standing against bushwhack lead. The enemy wouldn't fight out in the open.

Greg Stillwell was not a large man, but there was a rugged quality about him that made people forget that—and the ruthlessness in his outthrust jaw and cold eyes.

Seated behind his big old-fashioned desk, the banker kept on reading as he heard Nevada Jordan enter. Only when his visitor had closed the door did he look up. "I've been expecting you, Nevada." Stillwell eyed the tall man gravely. "I'm sorry about your brother."

Jordan's lips tightened. "Bein' sorry ain't enough, Stillwell. I aim to find out who framed Jim into Boot Hill. You was sidin' that combine nest of snakes last year when I rode out. Yuh—"

Across the street glass tinkled. As Nevada whipped sideward, he spared a quick look at Stillwell. In a glance, he saw a rifle barrel poked through a broken window above the general store. His pair of six-shooters blazed. Six bullets from his flaming gun tore through the bank's plate glass window. The rifle dropped to the street, a dead man slumped across the window sill.

"Good shootin'," Stillwell said, unperturbed. "Cool and deadly. How would you like to have the sheriff's job, Jordan?"

The question caught Jordan off-guard. "Look, Stillwell, I came here for a showdown, not for a lot of oily talk. The combine wolfed me a year ago, and now yore crooked lawman's killed Jim. You're the man that made this range unsafe for shirttail cowmen. When a man goes snake-killin', he's got to stomp the snake's head first."

A humorless smile thinned Stillwell's lips. "You won't kill me, Jordan," he said. "I know who killed your brother, and why—but I wasn't in on the deal. Not any. I admit I was in the combine at the start, but believe it or not, after I found out the deal they handed you a year ago I pulled out. I've been playing my cards close to my vest ever since. Jim's death calls for a new deal, and I aim to give it!"

Another trick. This was the coolest man Nevada Jordan had ever run up against. He would have to kill Stillwell in cold blood, because he saw that the banker could not be goaded into going for his gun. Jordan tried to rile himself to a pitch of hatred, of insanity, that would force him to shoot a man who wouldn't draw—but he found he was not built that way. His fingers whitened on the trigger of his twin six-guns. His lips made a thin, white line across his craggy face. His rocky eyes blazed.

Stillwell saw and read the look in Jordan's eyes. "You can't do it, Nevada," the big man said softly. "I wasn't in on that bushwack try at you a few minutes ago. I haven't been in on anything since Latimer and his killer crew took over the combine." He paused, frowning. "I wasn't fooling when I offered you the sheriff's job. Old Dan Camp knows the Latimer deal—and where I stood for the past year. Jim Jordan got killed, Dan and I knew the news of it would bring you back. We saw to it that the news reached you. I can't give you back your brother, but I can give you the man who killed him."

The banker stopped speaking suddenly. A heavy footfall sounded behind Jordan. He whipped around and saw Sheriff Tole Latimer in the doorway. The slump-shouldered lawman looked at Nevada Jordan over the sights of a six-gun. His hawklike gray eyes were hard and cold.

"I figured that's what you'd do, Stillwell," Latimer snarled. "But it won't work."

The sheriff's gun blazed. A grunt of surprise and pain came from Greg Stillwell, as he slumped across the desk. Jordan, caught off-balance, cut down on Latimer. Both shots missed. The lanky lawman let him have it. A bullet seared Jordan's left rib, as he squeezed both triggers and heard the hammers fall on empty guns. Latimer laughed harshly.

"Yuh couldn't have got away with it, Jordan. I've got my boys surroundin' this place. Front and back. If I don't come out, they'll close in. But I'll be the only one who'll go out of here alive. I—" His words stopped abruptly as he caught sight of the wounded banker.

Stillwell had pulled himself up and was trying to aim the derringer he held in his right hand. Latimer brought up his gun and sent a shot crashing across the room. The banker looked blankly at his shattered hand, and the tiny derringer fell in a hundred pieces. Gun thunder reverberated in the office.

TAKING advantage of the gun play, Nevada flung one of his empty guns at the sheriff's head, and lunging forward head first, butted the lawman backward. Latimer dropped his gun and Jordan pounced after it, skidding on his stomach across the floor. Panting, he came up on one knee, the gun leveled at Latimer.

All the blood drained from the lanky lawman's face, as he lifted his hands, hooking them toward the ceiling.

Greg Stillwell was awkwardly trying to stop the flow of blood from the wound where Latimer's bullet had grazed his head. With his right hand crippled from the exploding derringer, he was using his left to pour whisky on a piece of cloth. Jordan backed to the side of the banker, keeping his eye on Latimer, and laid one gun on the desk.

As darkness closed in, Nevada observed that some of Latimer's henchmen had barricaded themselves behind a heavy freight wagon in the back of the bank. The rest of the bushwackers were behind the upstairs windows across the street. Here was a trap, and not to Nevada's liking. No decent citizen would dare lift a hand to stop those renegades

(*Continued on Page* 153)

BY E. E. HALLERAN

Roman Nose went backward over his horse as though driven by a battering ram (CHAP. VII)

PRAIRIE

I

"WARBLIN' Willie" Andrews had not lifted his nasal voice in song since dawn. The wrinkles at the corners of his mild gray eyes were bunched as he squinted into the morning glare.

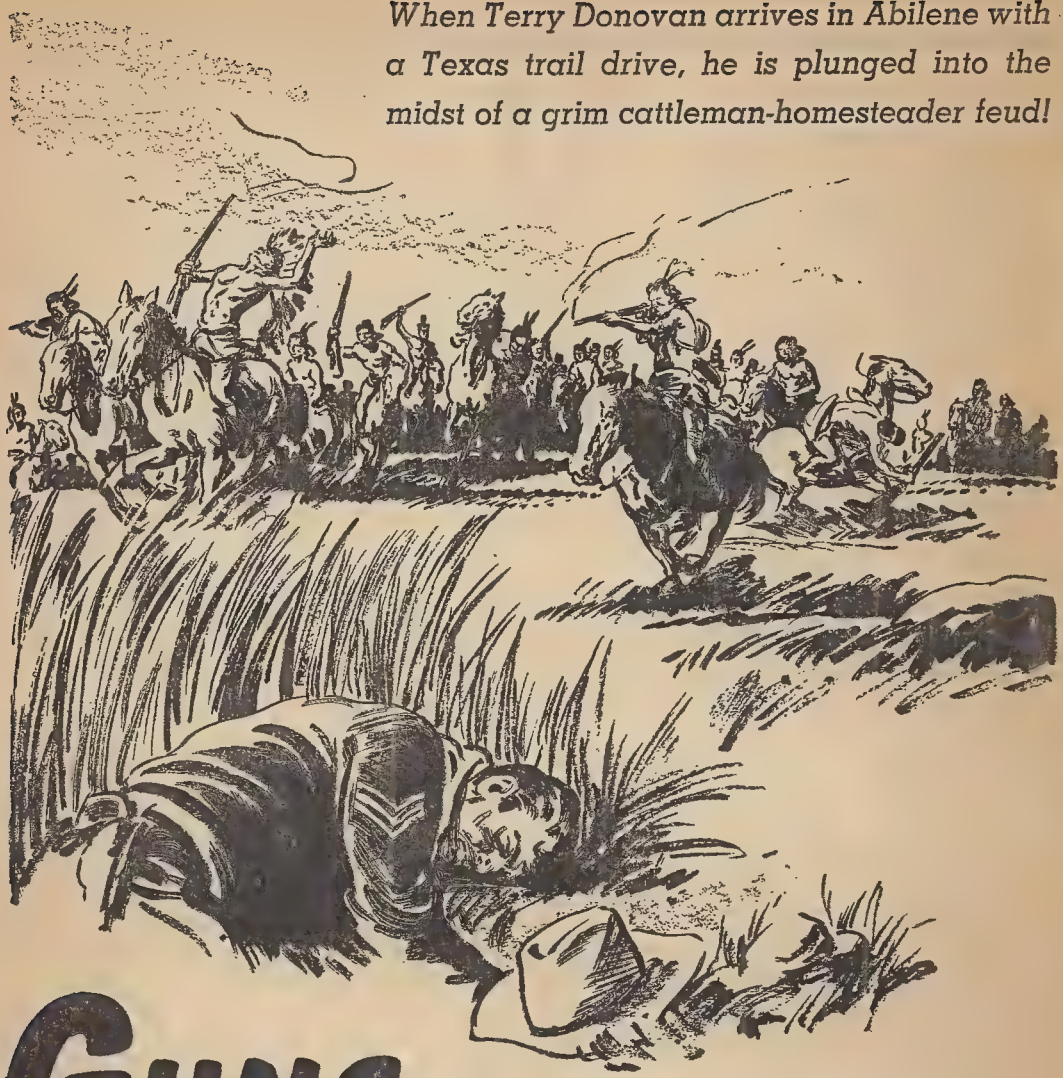
"Still think we're headed right, Terry?" he asked, frowning dolefully.

Terry Donovan smiled at his worry. "How can we go wrong with the river on our left all the time? We'll strike Fort Hooker by noon."

"Yo' better be right, dang yore carcass!" Willie grumbled. "We're two days late and we don't know what kind of a mess we're ridin' into." He spurred forward angrily.

It was the first trip for Andrews as boss of a trail herd and he was not

When Terry Donovan arrives in Abilene with a Texas trail drive, he is plunged into the midst of a grim cattleman-homesteader feud!



GUNS

AN EXCITING FRONTIER NOVEL

pleased with any part of the deal. Halfway up through the Territory with the Frying Pan's spring drive he had had the job dumped in his lap. A hundred of the strongest steers had been cut out to be left at Fort Hooker as a Government beef issue to reservation Indians.

Now they were nearing their destination and Willie was worrying himself into a state of nerves foreign to his usual carefree nature. Maybe these Indians would forget the deal their chiefs had made. And to add to Willie's troubles there had been bickering in the skeleton crew. Just this morning big Al Grinnel had come mighty close to starting a fight with Donovan over the choice of jobs for the day.

All in all, Andrews had plenty of reason to be troubled as he mounted a slight rise ahead of the herd. He was nearing the crest before he saw that one source of worry was over. On the steaming flats just beyond he could see the rambling log buildings, high-fenced corral and bristling stockade of Fort Hooker. The muddy Arapaho Fork sloshed on the left but the other three sides of the Agency clearing were lined with tepees. Indians from far and near had come for their shares of the white man's land payment.

Andrews tried to decide on a plan of campaign. It was going to be ticklish work getting the herd to the cattle pens through that crowd of excited savages.

"Cuss General Sherman anyhow!" he muttered. "Why did he have to promise 'em beef? They won't stay on their reservations nohow, so why waste good steers on 'em?"

He turned in the saddle to wave to the other Bar-O men, then swung to the side, allowing the slow-moving herd to come abreast.

"There she is!" he called to Donovan. "The plain's crawlin' with Injuns. I wonder if they're mad about us bein' late?"

"We'll soon see," Donovan said shortly, his gray eyes focused on the wild scene ahead.

EVEN as he spoke the sight of the approaching animals seemed to excite every male Indian on the flat and there was a general rush to meet the beef. Andrews swore helplessly as he watched gaily decked ponies coming toward him at a dead run, their yelling riders drumming naked heels against the horses' flanks. The lead steers had already come to a timid halt, long horns tossing nervously as they stared at the charging savages. At any moment they might break into a full-fledged stampede.

"Take over the point, Willie," Donovan yelled. "I'll try to stop 'em."

Andrews had neither the time nor the inclination to protest. He had to pitch in with the other two riders in a desperate effort to hold the steers in check. Working with the efficiency born of long experience he intercepted the steers which had started to swing toward him, turning them toward where another Bar-O man could swing them in at the rear. In minutes the restless herd was moving in a circle, safe if the Indians came no closer.

Only then did he find time to look toward the Agency. To his surprise—and vast relief—the Indian rush had been halted. Their vanguard had stopped at Donovan's signal and the other Indians were jamming up behind them.

"Dang me if the kid ain't done it!" Willie breathed.

He grinned hopefully as Donovan talked to some of the leaders. Then from the stockade appeared a squadron of cavalry and soon Donovan's efforts were being seconded by the firm maneuvering of the troopers. Presently every Indian was hurrying back to the post as rapidly as his pony could carry him. The troopers followed, only a lieutenant remaining behind to accompany Donovan back to the herd.

As the cattle were driven forward, a few other soldiers came to assist in getting the animals into the corrals. Presently the last reluctant steer was in and the bars were in place.

Andrews turned to grin happily at his little crew.

To his surprise only two of them were there. Donovan was hazing the ponies toward a small corral near the river bank, but the cavvy was not Donovan's job today.

"Looks like yo' ducked outa yore wrangler job in a powerful hurry, Al," he said significantly to the big, bearded cowhand who had ridden up beside him.

Al Grinnel grinned unpleasantly, his thick lips twisting away from yellowed teeth in scorn. "Why not?" he demanded. "I ain't supposed to be doin' it at all."

Andrews turned away silently. Something like a sneer showed on the round face of young "Button" McTague, the fourth member of the outfit. McTague was as big as Grinnel, a hulk of a lad whose shallow mind saw Al as a hero. Now the kid was gloating at the way his burly companion was talking down the straw boss.

Andrews wanted to kick himself for

his own indecisive rôle, but he was determined to avoid trouble.

"We'll hit the trail in an hour or two," he said. "I'll get my receipt from the Indian Agent and we'll soak up some grub. After that we'll be makin' tracks back to the main outfit."

"Don't wait for us, Willie," Grinnel said, his laugh a challenge. "We'll be seein' a bit of fun before we hit leather again."

Andrews hesitated for just a moment. Now was the time to declare himself. Instead, he rode away without a reply.

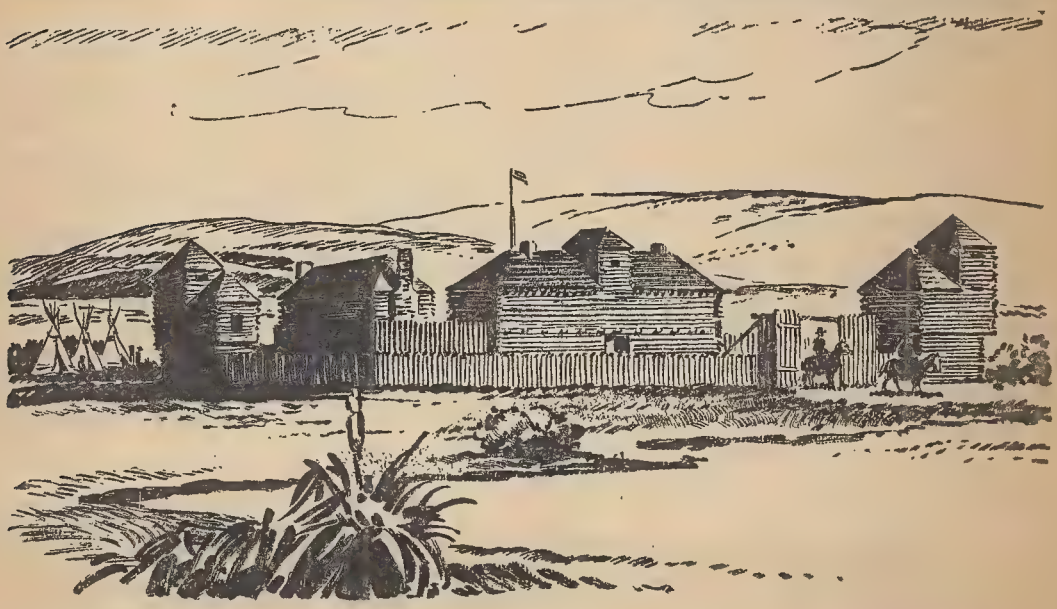
When he entered the Agency he found the nervous Indian Agent bawling contradictory orders to a pair of civilian assistants while a cavalry lieutenant stood by grimly, his eyes cold. Everyone seemed to be quick-tempered from the strain of having so many Indians around, and Willie was greeted with brusque impatience.

"Don't holler about receipts now!" the Agent snapped. "I'll take care of you after I get this pack of heathens straightened out. Perdition's going to break loose if we don't get them moving pretty soon." He seemed to realize the sharpness of his tone, for he added hastily, "Go on back to my quarters and help yourself to a drink. Make yourself at home till I finish this confounded job."

WILLIE grinned amiably and walked into the back room where a gaunt old man sat at a plank table. The oldster nodded and pushed a bottle across toward him.

"Don't mind Keller," he said. "He's nervous about the beef issue—and I can't say as I blame him."

He went on, "I'm Jackson Leonard. Been blacksmithin' along the Santy Fee trail for quite a spell but I got a hankerin' to settle down on some of that Kansas land the Government's handin' out so cheap. We fell in with some troopers yesterday and they talked us into comin' here with them."



It was obvious that the man was in bad health. Suddenly Willie was not so anxious to sit here and chat. Some day his own wandering career might reach a point like this—and he did not want to think about it.

Gulping a quick drink he went back into the front room, but the officials had moved out to the corral, ready to begin issuing steers to the Indians.

Willie cut across toward the stock pens and climbed to a top rail. The Agent and his assistants had posted themselves at a heavy-timbered chute. The principal chiefs stood near them and Willie was just in time to see a long consultation over a written list.

A band of Comanches drew the first pair of steers, promptly driving off their allotted animals, the squaws following behind with the supplies they had previously been given. One of the smaller groups drew a single steer. Evidently they lived closer to the post than did the Comanches for they proceeded to slaughter their beef on the spot instead of driving it home.

The small boys of the family group made the first attack on the animal. Dressed for the celebration and mounted two to a horse they attacked as the steer came charging from the chute, discharging arrows into the brute's flank and neck, yelling excitedly while their elders nodded approval.

As the steer swung in a maddened frenzy, the older braves took over. They closed in with their guns, firing delightedly until the steer went down. Then the dogs and squaws went to work, the dogs having their brief moment before the women drove them off and began turning the animal into meat.

Willie Andrews dropped from the corral rail and headed back for the Agency.

The excitement around the corral was in full blast when Terry Donovan arrived, after leaving the Bar-O ponies in charge of two troopers. He could see nothing of Andrews, so turned toward the river, to get away from the turmoil.

Not until he was at the water's edge did he notice a camp where drooping oxen browsed beside a wagon. Its broad-tired wheels told him it had been a Santa Fe Trail freighter. Now it fairly bulged with additions and repairs which attested to the mechanical skill and ingenuity of its owner. Rounding the built-up rear of the odd prairie schooner Terry came upon a tense little tableau. Two men faced a girl across a small cooking fire, the men obviously drunk and the girl just as obviously angry.

She seemed small as she faced them but Donovan realized that she was reasonably tall, her slender figure only partly disguised by the denim pants and flannel shirt she wore.

"Get out of here, both of you!" she ordered. "I'll shoot if I have to."

McTague and Grinnel laughed. Suddenly Grinnel made a lunge forward, seized the girl by the wrist before she could dodge away, and pulled her toward him.

His laughter turned to a bellow of anger as the girl hammered both brown fists into the bewhiskered countenance so close to her own.

"Let her alone, Al!" a sharp voice crackled at his shoulder. "You'll make us all a heap of trouble acting like this."

Grinnel hauled himself erect, replying with drunken scorn: "Go 'way, you renegade! Go talk to yore Injuns!"

He turned to make another pass at the girl but Donovan cuffed him smartly across the ear.

"Let her alone!" he said shortly.

Grinnel quickly lost all interest in the girl. He lunged at Terry.

"Yuh polecat! I'll learn yuh to git gay with me!"

TERRY sidestepped the big man's rush, dodging the flailing arms but remaining close enough to hook a hard right to Grinnel's jaw as the big man plowed by him. The blow sent Al sprawling. He rolled completely over, then scrambled to his knees and went for his gun.

Donovan sprang aside. But Grinnel suddenly went limp with an explosive grunt, his gun dropping from his hand. A five-pound rock had struck him violently between the shoulder blades.

Terry jumped in quickly to pick up the fallen gun. He looked up at the girl.

"Nice throwing," he commented drily. "Looks like he's out cold."

She did not seem particularly angry or excited. "It was a pleasure," she said in a well-modulated voice.

Terry chuckled, and turned to McTague. "Button," he ordered, "help me load Al on his bronc before he wakes up and gets loco all over again."

Some of Young McTague's vacant smile was gone. He was too drunk to be of much assistance, even as he had been in no condition to take any part in the brief skirmish.

"I'll help," the girl said. "It looks like we'll have to load both of them."

Terry grinned. "I hope you feel strong. Al's a pretty big hulk to haul around as dead weight."

"Don't worry. I haven't spent the last three years helping Dad shoe horses and mules for nothing."

She ran across to Grinnel's pony and led the animal back. Al was stirring again, but she did not hesitate. Grasping one of the big man's arms while

In the bullet-torn darkness Terry was being thrown over the ears of a dying horse (CHAP. II)

Terry took the other she helped to lift him into his saddle, even lending a hand to steady him until she saw that he was awake enough to hold his seat. Then she stood back while Terry boosted McTague into the saddle.

The big kid was blinking owlishly but he seemed to feel the urge for one show of defiance. "Al will fix you for this, Donovan!" he muttered thickly.

He lifted the reins with elaborate dignity and started to lead Grinnel's mount toward the upper flat. "Better head for the corral, Button," Terry called. "Find Willie—and see that Al doesn't fall off or come back here!"

When he turned back to the girl she was watching him curiously, a trace of smile on her lips.

"I had grub on when your friends came to call," she said. "You're invited to sit in if you're willing to risk my cooking."

"My curiosity won't let me leave," he bantered. "The girl cooks, shoes horses, and throws rocks. I'll have to stick around—and I'm not particularly hungry."

She gave him a quick glance. "Are you by any chance being gallant?"

"And if I am?"

"Then stop it. I'm not used to it and I'm not dressed for the part. It embarrasses me."

He realized that there was truth behind the lightly spoken words. A girl like this could scarcely have been satisfied to roam the country in such an outfit. It was remarkable that she was no more self-conscious than she was.

II

THE girl bustled on with her preparations. Terry waited in silence until she held out a tin pan of stew with a couple of light biscuits on the side.

"Better take it," she warned him. "Not many grub line riders get a handout from this outfit. Since Dad got the farming bug he has become pretty touchy about the cattlemen. He's always talking about how cowmen hog the land. We probably won't be able to put up fences for years to come but he's already arguing the merits of the closed range."

Terry regarded her queerly. "You mean you're going to be nesters?"

"We are! And don't try to make it sound like something criminal! We propose to homestead some of that Kansas grain land and give up this eternal prowling of the trails. The life we have led during the past few years has been as bad as that of an Indian." She caught herself quickly. "No offense meant."

Donovan looked puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Your drunken friend made some sort of remark about you having Indian friends, and I didn't want you to think that I was referring to that."

He laughed quietly. "Al's just puzzled because I talked to the red brothers a while ago. To him that can mean nothing except that I have some criminal connection with the tribes. When I was a kid I was taken prisoner by the Cheyennes. I learned a lot of things about them, including the language—and I have no illusions about them."

Suddenly, a horseman appeared at the crest of the slope, a dusty, stoop-shouldered rider who sang lustily as he rode toward the river.

As I came up the Chis'um Trail,
The Chis'um Trail, the Chis'um Trail,
As I came up the Chis'um Trail
I met a lady fair.

A sparkle bright was in her glance,
In her glance, in her glance.
No fairer gal in denim pants
I ever hope to see.

Terry glanced at the girl to see whether she was going to take offense at the allusion to her attire but she was obviously amused.

"Light down, Willie," Terry invited. "Meet a friend of mine."

"The name is Susan Leonard," she said quickly. "There's stew enough for one more if you're willing to take a chance on its quality."

"Thank yo', ma'am," Willie replied. "I've already et, at the Agency. I take it I met yore pappy up there. Tall, oldish gent with mighty sot ideas about cowmen."

"Wait a minute," Donovan cut in. "Let me finish the introductions. Miss Leonard, meet Mr. Warblin' Willie Andrews who is even more disreputable than he looks."

The girl smiled at Willie. "Call me Sue, Warbler. And some day maybe I'll find out who your nameless friend is."

Terry laughed. "I plumb forgot that. Do the honors, will you, Willie?"

Willie did, with elaborate dignity.

Then he turned serious.

"We'll have to hit the trail, Terry. There's four hours of daylight yet and we can't afford to waste it. You and me will take the cavvy and the others can ketch up to us when they get sobered up. The nesters around Abilene are fixin' to fight the cattle drives, so our boys will need all the help they kin git fer the last few weeks of the drive."

Donovan stood up. "In that case I can't argue."

Sue Leonard gave him a level glance. "There speaks the cattleman," she said. "He'll leave anything to go nester-hunting. Farmers are fine folks so long as they do not object to you drovers taking your herds across their grain fields. If they become unreasonable you have to shoot them a little—diplomatically, of course—to let them know their places."

Donovan put down his empty plate. "You don't know the facts, and neither do I," he told her quietly. "Right now my job calls for me to get back with the herd. After that—well, I'll see you again and we'll see if we can't come to some kind of an agreement."

He watched her gather up the utensils. For minutes neither of them spoke. Willie slipped away toward his pony, grinning.

Finally Terry murmured, "Thanks for the meal."

SHE made no reply until he had started away.

Then she said calmly, "We're heading for Abilene. I'll see you later."

Donovan grinned over his shoulder. "That's a promise," he told her, and hurried after Andrews.

"Did you get your receipt, Willie?" he asked, when he caught up.

"Not yet. I figured I'd let things quiet down a bit before I pestered that pore galoot. He was havin' plenty troubles with the Injuns."

"Better get it. I'll start, and you can catch up with me on the trail."

"What'll I do about Al and Button?"

Donovan shrugged. "You're boss of this outfit, Willie. But it's my guess you might as well leave them here to sober up. They'll come along."

He headed toward the corral and the Bar-O ponies.

The sun was still fairly high when he moved out with the little remuda. Willie came up with him just before dusk. The stooped rider was grinning, and there was no sign of any other horsemen.

"Al and the Button will be along in a day or so," he remarked. "They was still throwin' a pretty wide loop back there, so I got the commandant to dump 'em in the calaboose fer a spell. They'll be along, seein' as how they both got wages comin' to 'em."

Terry nodded soberly. "I reckon it's all right—just so they don't cause any more trouble."

Willie chuckled. "I'm still curious about that," he admitted. "I gather you smacked Grinnel right unpolite. He's plenty sore about it. Feel like lettin' me in on the rest of the yarn?"

Donovan smiled thinly, and explained. Willie's eyes opened wide.

"No wonder you and her got friendly so fast! But yo'll have to watch Grinnel. Don't think he won't try to git even!"

"I'll take care of myself. I'm not half as worried over Al as I am about this nester business. I can't see any reason why we should be fighting hoemen. What's it all about?"

"Hard to tell," Andrews replied soberly. "I been hearin' that the hoemen around Abilene are all spooked up because they think us Tejanos are bringin' in diseased cattle. The town people want the shippin' business but the hoemen don't like to have the drives goin' through. We'll probably find out a lot of things before we get the Bar-O steers into the cars. . . ."

Grinnel and McTague did not come up until just before Donovan and Andrews caught the trail herd. Terry felt certain that they had been deliberately hanging back, so that they would not have to do a share of the work. He said nothing, however. Willie was in authority. Nor did Andrews report any of their troubles when they rode into camp that night.

They found the other men tense and expectant. Returning outfits along the trail had reported plenty of trouble with nester raids south of Abilene. The X N crowd had lost two hundred prime steers one day short of the railroad. The Circle T had fought with raiders and in the resulting stampede had lost a number of cattle. Every trail herd had had some sort of trouble at the end of the drive, but none seemed to know exactly who had attacked them.

"It looks ornery," Willie commented to Donovan. "These hoemen was mostly Unionists durin' the late fracas and they ain't forgot which side Texas was on. If they've declared theirselves out to bust the cattle business they'll be sure to remember that it's Texans they're fightin'."

Terry made no comment. He tried to convince himself that his only interest in the matter was because of duty. He had been hired to help drive the herd to the Kansas Pacific loading pens. Nothing else could have any meaning to him, especially when he considered the debt of gratitude he owed to "Snowshoe" Tooker, the Frying Pan's trail boss. Tooker had given him a job after his release from the Cheyennes, had given him a home. He owed it to Tooker to see the herd through regardless of what happened.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy as that. His thoughts went back to a girl who defended the rights of the squatters. To her the drovers were trespassers who trampled crops and violated hard-won property rights. It was hard to reconcile those thoughts with his loyalty to Tooker.

Donovan kept it to himself, but wrestled with the problem as he went about his daily wrangler duties. There had been no real signs of trouble but the riders seemed to sense a difference around them. They were tense and silent as they prodded the steers along or rode endless circles around the sleeping animals at night. Any time now the storm would break. . . .

AT THE touch of a hand on his shoulder Donovan slipped out of his blankets and thrust his feet quickly into his boots. The night had turned chill and the redhead shivered as he rolled his soogans, to stack them with the other camp rolls. He was still less than half awake when he started for the fire, aware that Tooker was rousing Willie Andrews.

The cook was already handing out tin cups of scalding coffee to McTague, Grinnel and a tall, thin cowpuncher named Lynch.

Tooker and Andrews came over quickly as Donovan shoved into the circle and took his coffee cup. Tooker spoke quickly, but with some of the mildness which had so often deceived strange riders. Snowshoe Tooker was not a big man—except for his feet—and many a man had made the mistake of picking him for an easy mark.

"Extra careful tonight, boys," he warned. "This ought to be our last night on the trail. If we're going to have trouble it will come tonight."

Donovan frowned. "Do you honestly expect an attack?" he asked. "We haven't run afoul of any nesters. What reason would they have for jumping us?"

"I don't know," Tooker said honestly, "but we don't take any chances. Nesters on the warpath may be all a pipe dream, but we'll plan for a fight and hope we don't get it. I want Andrews, Grinnel and McTague to ride herd as usual. Lynch will take over the nighthawk job and Donovan our outer picket line. Terry, ride in a wide circle some distance away from the herd. If there's going to be trouble I want you to make it happen as far from the herd as possible. Don't let any jayhawkers get close enough to start a stampede."

Terry nodded, but there was uneasiness in his mind as he moved out into the star-flecked night. He had been hoping to find some clue to the mystery of the cattleman-nester feud; now he was facing a showdown without any means of making his own decision about it.

Terry had not gone far from camp when he realized that the other men were just ahead of him. The faint silhouettes of four riders blended into the dark background which would be the resting cattle. Willie had picked a song which was a Bar O favorite. Across the dark prairie the words came faintly but clearly:

We're campin' tonight on the cold damp ground.
Cowpoke, shed a tear.
You've got no place to call yore home
When yo' herd the dumb, dang steer.
Campin' tonight, campin' tonight, campin' on the cold, damp ground.

Terry smiled, but his mirth faded as the meaning of the words struck home. "Got no place to call your home." There was his situation in a nutshell! A man who had a home wouldn't be torn between conflicting emotions as to where his real interest lay. A fellow had to decide what he wanted his life to be, then work toward it. This aimless existence did nothing for a man except keep him in trouble.

Maybe there was more to this nester proposition than was apparent. The hoemen had a permanency which the cowboy never seemed to achieve or understand. It had not been the cattleman who had changed the country from wilderness to civilization; it had been the man with the plow. It was not pleasant to think like that just now. Perhaps before the night ended he would have to do battle with such men.

He kept his bronc moving slowly in a wide circle, staying close enough to hear Willie's endless verses, but far enough away so that the sound would not interfere with his alertness.

He made two complete circles and was well around on his third when he could feel a difference in the night. Something moved in the darkness and he eased his pony forward, making certain he was not in a line with the campfire behind him. He halted to listen. This time he distinctly heard the soft *clop-clop* of hoofs on the prairie. Riders—a number of them—were approaching at a cautious walk.

Once more he rode slowly forward, eyes straining in the silky blackness of the night. He could hear the riders clearly now and his six-gun was in his hand as he recalled Tooker's admonition to meet trouble as far from the herd as possible.

Again he halted, just in time to hear a low-voiced command. The hoofbeats ceased and Terry patted his own mount soothingly, trying to keep the animal motionless. Suddenly dark forms loomed up under the stars, almost upon him.

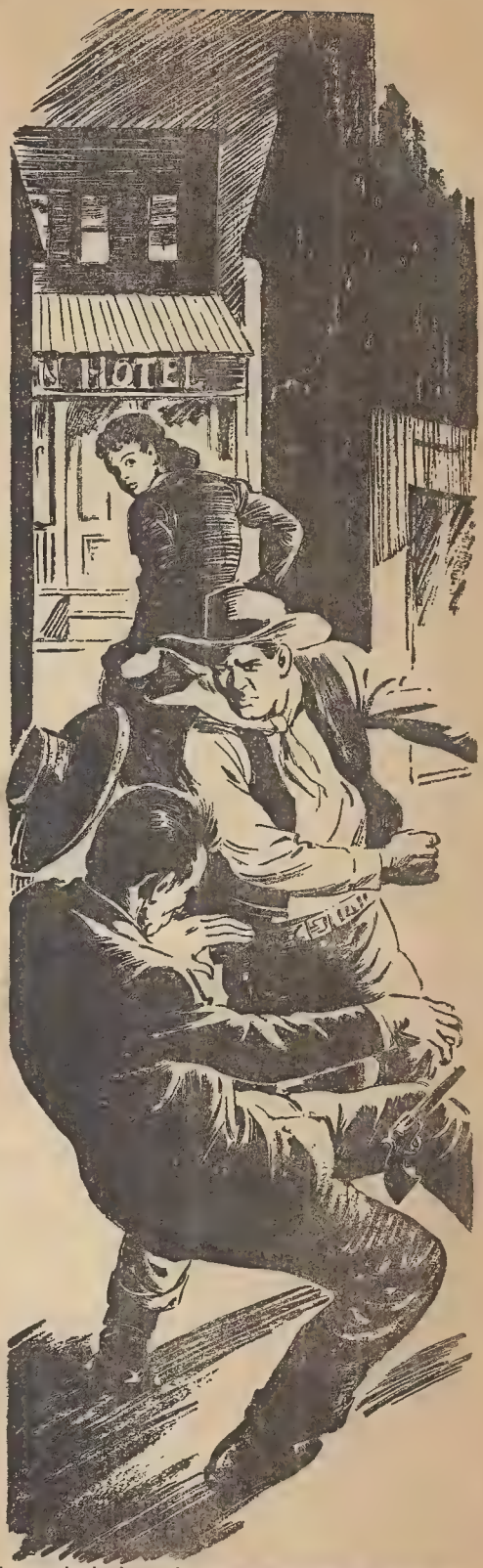
"Who's there?" Donovan challenged sharply. "What d'ya want?"

The intruders halted promptly.

"What's it to yuh?" a deep voice growled.

"There's cattle bedded here. Keep away."

THERE seemed to be a clash of conflicting orders in the ranks of the dark riders, then a jet of orange flame split the night. Terry heard the quick zip of lead, his own gun booming a prompt return. He fired twice and whirled his mount to one side, just in time to duck the hail of lead that was aimed at his gun flashes. The invaders, still bewildered, hadn't located him as yet. Lips set in grim lines, he emptied his gun into the black ranks and wheeled



Terry ducked, and came up with a blow that smashed Barlow to the floor (CHAP. IV)

sideward again, hearing grunts of pain.

He thumbed in fresh cartridges, thankful that he had one of the new model guns. In a scrap like this it would be awkward reloading with cap and ball. By that time the jayhawkers were in full pursuit even though their shots indicated that they hadn't yet located their target. It was a good bet they didn't know the exact location of the herd, so Terry took a line of retreat which would take him close to the camp but not in the direction of the cattle.

A command rang out behind him and the sounds of pursuit dwindled to a gradual halt. By the time the last raider had stopped Terry was also motionless. He could hear low-toned but angry curses, two voices as distinct in the clear night air as the doleful notes of Warblin' Willie Andrews had been. One of the voices was heavy while the other was medium in tone but easily remembered because of the clipped words it spoke. Maybe these men were nesters; maybe they were jayhawkers. That no longer mattered. They had launched their attack without any provocation. It had to be war from now on.

Terry could hear them reaching some sort of decision. There was a sudden flurry of hoofs as the men put spurs to their ponies, and they were no longer coming in Terry's direction. Apparently they were guessing at the location of the herd, using the campfire as a beacon. Donovan fired two deliberate shots into the dark blur which marked the rustler band and waited again, making sure that they turned to come after him. Then he let fly with another pair of lead salutes and put spurs to his bronc.

He could hear a howl of pain, but the raiders had spotted him. Slugs whined around his head as he dodged, something tugging briefly at the slack of his shirt as he wheeled his pony for the straightaway run. He flung another pair of shots behind him, but still they came on. His pony jerked suddenly in its stride but went on with increased speed. Grazed, Terry thought grimly. The enemy was shooting better now.

He burned his last cartridges, trying to delay the pursuit. He felt the impact of a raider bullet at the heel of his boot, then his pony quivered and plunged. There was a sensation of flying through the bullet-torn darkness and he knew he was being thrown headlong over the ears of a dying horse. Almost as he hit the ground he twisted his body to fire a last shot into the night behind him. Then everything went black and the sounds of the battle were blotted out.

III

WHEN Terry opened his eyes he didn't know where he was or how he came to be there. He tested his arms and legs gingerly, finding to his surprise that everything seemed to be in good working order. He clawed around in the dirt for his gun but was unable to find it. Finally he tried to get up, certain that he had simply been knocked out by the fall and was otherwise uninjured.

A dark bulk on the ground near him helped to tell the story. His pony had been killed, accounting for that plunge. He listened to the sounds of the night, most welcome being the reassuring singsong of night-herding cowboys. Apparently the rustlers had been driven off.

He grunted with pain as he wavered to his feet, head throbbing with the effort. He started staggering toward the firelight. He had not gone more than a dozen steps when a pair of riders loomed in silhouette against the fire, then he heard the soft voice of Snowshoe Tooker. He hailed the trail boss and was greeted by a shout of relief.

"That you, Donovan? Where've you been? We've been looking all over for you."

"I musta been out cold, I reckon. I just woke up and found myself here with a dead bronc. What's been going on since the fight started?"

Tooker whistled. "You *have* been out cold! It's been half an hour since we came tearing out here to help you. How bad are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch, so far as I know. How did the fight come out?"

"The cussed jayhawkers lit out pronto when our boys bore down on 'em. We chased them a piece but circled back to look for you. Climb up here behind me. I reckon you saved us a peck of trouble by stopping them ornery polecats out here away from the herd."

He wheeled his pony as Terry took a precarious seat behind the saddle.

"Hank," he said, "scout on a bit and see what's what. I'll take Donovan back

to camp and see how many pieces are missing."

"You might look for a couple of dead rustlers out there, Hank," he suggested. "Seems like I remember a couple of them hitting the dirt just before I took my dive."

Tooker grunted approval. "Got a couple, did you? Any idea who the raiders were?"

"Nope—but there was one voice I'll remember if I ever hear it again. The boss raider had a voice like a bull. . . ."

It was dawn when Terry roused to the shout of "Grub pile!" Tooker eyed him anxiously as he sat up, stretching.

"How do you feel, kid?" he asked. "Still groggy?"

Terry managed a smile. "You'll spoil me, Boss. A cowboy ain't supposed to get hurt by falling off a hoss. I'm all right except for stiff shoulders and a sore neck."

"Good. Then I've got a job for you. You're going along with me into Abilene. I've a notion we oughta look the town over before we run the herd in."

"Do you think there will be another attack near town?"

"No. At least not like this last one. The trouble is we may run into something that's harder to fight. After you went to sleep Hank came in to report a couple of dead hombres out on the prairie. They look like nesters, and there's a chance that some kind of law business will tie into us."

He swung to face the men around the fire. "Everybody get our story straight, boys. We've got to watch sharp that they don't frame anything on us. Our story is we heard shooting last night but didn't go out to investigate. We threw every man into extra guard duty and didn't let anybody leave the herd. We were so busy looking out for our own interests that we don't know a thing about what happened out there. We figure maybe it was a couple of lots of jayhawkers running afoul of each other."

"How about my gun and my bronc?" Terry asked. "They're both out there somewhere and the pony will have the Frying Pan's horse brand on him."

Tooker grinned. "We took care of that. Here's your gun. If anybody finds the pony they'll have to dig him up along with the two dead rustlers—and we did a mighty fine job of burying."

Terry took his empty six-gun. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Andrews is boss while I'm gone," Tooker went on. "Keep the herd moving and you'll make town by noon or a little later. I'll see Major De Groodt and find out if he has shipping arrangements. Play it safe and we'll all be ready to take things easy by nightfall."

AFTER a quick breakfast they all turned to the work of the day, trying to keep up the appearance of carelessness. Still the tension was evident as the cook packed his kit in the chuckwagon. The events of the night didn't promise too well for the immediate future. They were heading into an unfamiliar town, a town where there was an enemy they did not even know.

Tooker and Donovan rode out ahead of the herd, neither of them saying a word. Terry could not help linking the dead raiders with his memory of Sue Leonard. Maybe those men had been rustlers or jayhawkers, but they might just as well have been honest farmers who were trying to defend their lands from the invasion of trespassing cattlemen. It didn't help his peace of mind to realize that he had gone into open war with the farmers he had decided to imitate. Shooting nesters was not the best way in the world for a young fellow to get a start in life.

Presently Tooker broke in to explain the job ahead of them. "I'm leaving the scouting to you, Terry. When we hit town I'll have to look up Major De Groodt. Wander around and see how much information you can soak up. I can't tell you how to go about it because I don't suppose the place is anything like what it was the last time I saw it. One day these boom towns are just huts, the next they're full of unpainted houses, and the day after that they're full of gunmen, gamblers and crooks. You'll just have to watch."

They had been following the muddy stream since crossing Smoky Hill but now Tooker swung wide as a cluster of buildings appeared.

"There she is," he announced. "On the banks of Mud Creek. The railroad pens are off there on the right."

Terry noted the camps of emigrants beside the creek, their wagon tops gray or white in the morning sun. Then he gave his attention to the town. The

place was shabby in spite of its newness, its slab shacks sweltering in the quivering heat of mid-morning.

Tooker pointed across toward the cattle pens. "That must be Drovers Cottage," he remarked. "That's where they plan to entertain the big boys who come around by train and boat to meet their herds."

"Like Major De Groodt?" Terry asked.

Tooker smiled. "Exactly. I reckon you never met the big boss, did you?"

"No. Judging by the way the boys talk I haven't missed much. Most of them ain't got much time for a gent who sits around in hotels and takes the profits while they get saddle sores, broken legs and chilblains for forty a month."

Tooker shrugged. "De Groodt pays as well as any rancher. It's none of our business how he spends his time."

They were riding now along a dusty lane blocked by the shining Kansas Pacific tracks. To their right were the cattle pens, two small houses, and the two-story Drovers Cottage. A cross street bore a sign, "Texas Street."

Tooker swung around the corner, motioning for Terry to follow. "Better stick with me until I see the Major. Then you can slip away and do your scouting."

"Are you going to tell the boss about last night?" Donovan asked.

"No. He'd be more likely to cause trouble than to do us any good. We'll keep quiet and see what happens."

It was stifling in the big front room of the hotel, the morning heat in no wise diminished by the shutters which had been drawn to keep out the glare of the sun. In the semi-gloom, however, four men lounged in the splendor of frock coats, pleated shirts and fancy cravats. Tall glasses stood before them and they were playing a listless game of stud.

Three of them did not even look up as the two riders entered, but the fourth gave them a scowling inspection. He was a lean man of middle age, wearing a gray goatee, and his glance was arrogant as he scanned the dusty riders.

"The Iron Trail bar is down Texas Street, boys," he remarked, waving a freshly lighted cheroot. "You'll be a lot more comfortable down there."

Terry was about to make an angry retort but Tooker cut in quickly. "Look again, Major. I guess you don't know me in working clothes."

MAJOR DE GROODT stared, then climbed to his feet and held out a reluctant hand.

"Glad to see you, Tooker. Where's the beef?"

"Coming along in a few hours. I rode ahead to see what arrangements you've made."

"About what?"

"Cars for shipping. I'd like to get as many head loaded as I can before I let the boys get away into town. It might be hard to get the crew together, once they start to celebrate."

"I'll have to ask Colonel Gore," De Groodt said finally. "He runs the hotel and does practically everything else around here." He bawled lustily toward the stairway: "Hey, Gore! Will you come here a moment, please?"

A quiet-appearing man of medium build appeared promptly, smiling at Tooker as he waited to hear what De Groodt wanted.

"Are there cars ready for use, Gore?" the Major asked.

"About a dozen on the siding."

"We'll want them," De Groot said bluntly. "See to making the arrangements, will you?"

"Still sure you won't sell outright, Major?" one of the other stud players cut in lazily. "My offer stands."

Donovan almost jumped. He had heard those tones in the darkness of the prairie only a few hours before!

He studied the speaker carefully. The man was as ornately dressed as his fellow plutocrats but there was an air about him which they lacked, a certain hardness not physical.

De Groodt shook his head. "Sorry, Barlow. I have already made my market arrangements." He smiled as he added, "I guess you'll have to look elsewhere for your broker's percentage."

Colonel Gore beckoned to Tooker. "Come along, Snowshoe," he invited. "We'll see the railroad agent right away."

De Groodt settled back to his poker game. Terry caught Tooker's quick glance and turned. So this was the kind of man who ran the Bar O! A man who seemed to be on the best of terms with a cleverly disguised rustler. Yet in spite of his disgust Terry realized that the

threat to the Bar O interests involved a personal danger and he had to take steps to block it. That meant getting information to help him understand the nature of the danger.

He headed down Texas Street. Almost at once his attention was caught by a large building with "Iron Trail Hotel and Bar" across its front. That ought to be a good bet for a little cautious gossiping.

It was even gloomier in the long barroom than it had been at the Drovers but the rest of the scene was different. Three rough-looking men stood at one end of the long bar, talking to a rotund man in a white apron. Terry was sharply conscious of their hostile glares.

"Looks like the winter has broke, gents," he greeted solemnly. "I wouldn't be surprised if the ice went out any day now."

The bartender chuckled, running a fat hand across his head to smooth the gray hair over a thin spot.

"You were planning to celebrate the matter?" he asked.

"A little," Terry allowed. "Just a little—seeing as how I don't draw my pay till tonight."

The round man perked up his ears at mention of a pay roll. "New outfit in town?" he asked.

"Soon will be. I'm from the Bar O. Rode in with the trail boss while he reports to the old he-coon at the Drovers. I didn't exactly like the joyous welcome over there so I headed down this way."

"Right," the fat man approved. "I'm Dan Gillespie, owner of this shanty and right now my own bartender. We'll see that you boys are treated right. Better have one on the house so you'll remember to take the word back."

Terry had nodded his agreement when a tall man with an enormous nose cut in with a question.

"How far is your outfit, stranger?"

"Couple hours, maybe. Why?"

"Just wonderin'. I'm Morgan Hapes, deputy sheriff. There's been so much trouble lately between the trail herds and the farmers that I like to keep track of things. Have any trouble on the trail?"

SOMETHING about the way he asked the question made Donovan study him more closely. For though, the tall man had been speaking quietly, at first, now Terry remembered those heavy-toned orders. This lawman had been the leader of those raiders!

"No trouble to speak of," he replied easily. "We had a bit of a scare last night when there was some right smart shootin' out on the prairie. The boss routed us all out to stand extra guard on the herd but the fight didn't get close enough to bother us."

The tall man scowled ominously. "How do I know you ain't lyin'? Two men are missin' today and there's been a heap of trouble between you Texans and the farmers here. Mebbe you fellows killed Ingalls and Burt and faked this story to cover up."

"Could be," Donovan agreed quietly, "but it ain't likely. If I'd plugged anybody I'd never admit I was anywhere near the place it happened. I reckon a smart deputy would ride out and look things over before he started tossin' around any charges."

"Let's not have any trouble, Morg," the bartender urged Hapes. "This boy tells a straight story. It sounds like the nesters ran into trouble with some of these jayhawker outfits that have been raiding the trail herds. Maybe they fouled each other in the dark."

Without answering Hapes strode toward the door, followed by his two friends. Terry got a good look at the two, one of them a little fellow with teeth like a woodchuck and the other a stout man with a vacant grin. These were men he would have to watch.

Gillespie lowered his voice as the trio went out.

"There's something funny about those men, son," he warned. "They pretend to be nesters and they have land claims but I don't think any of them work hard at it. They're no more honest farmers than Morg Hapes is an honest lawman."

"Then what's their game?" Terry asked. "Nesters might have a reason for trying to keep Texas cattle out of the country. Everybody else seems more likely to profit by having the herds come in." He shrugged. "No business of mine. Right now all I want is something to eat."

"Mom Fowler handles the eatin' trade here," Gillespie said. "She's right next door and her grub is all right."

Donovan found the little eating house all that Gillespie had promised. When

he had eaten he mounted and rode back through the alley which flanked the Iron Trail, instead of returning up Texas Street. And he saw something which made him almost forget Gillespie, Barlow and Hapes. In the stable yard of the hotel stood a battered prairie schooner—the wagon belonging to the Leonards.

The little man with the gopher teeth came out of the stable as Terry pulled up short.

"Lookin' fer somebody?" he inquired.

"No," Donovan said cheerfully. "I was just lookin' at that wagon. Seems like it's been through the wars."

"Mebbe it has," the little man agreed, more sociably. "The feller that drove it in ain't in no better shape. He was camped out there along the crick with the rest of the hoeman but when he took sick his daughter brung him here where he could have a roof over his head."

Terry swung his bronc toward Texas Street again. "I reckon I'll visit the sick, *compadre*," he told the gopher.

Leaving the roan at the Iron Trail hitching-rack he reentered the bar. The tubby bartender had a new companion —a most unexpected one. The big man who had been playing stud with De Groodt at the Drovers Cottage.

"I hear you've got some friends o' mine living here," Terry said casually. "Folks named Leonard. How do I go about seeing them?"

Gillespie opened his lips but the big man spoke first.

"Maybe you don't, cowboy," he said flatly. "A sick man don't want visitors." His tone conveyed the impression that he was issuing a warning.

Terry eyed him quietly. "You the doctor?" he asked.

"No."

"Then don't be offering free advice. Gillespie, where did you say I'd find the Leonards?"

The sout man answered almost grudgingly, "First room to your right at the top of the steps." He pointed to a broad staircase which divided the rear half of the dance floor.

Donovan went up the stairway quickly and knocked on the door. It was opened by Sue Leonard.

"What—" she began. Then she recognized her visitor and swung the door wider. "Won't you come in?" she invited.

IV

FOLLOWING Sue into the room, Terry's attention was quickly taken by the haggard oldster on the bed. It was all too obvious how sick the man was, and Terry spoke seriously as he faced the girl.

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing." She shook her head sadly. "Father is comfortable, and that is all we can ask. Mr. Gillespie is going to move us to a rear room this afternoon where it will be quieter. We were bothered a lot by noise from the bar just before dawn this morning."

"Did you recognize any voices?"

She started to shake her head, then spoke quietly. "I believe I did. There was a general hum, but I heard one heavy voice I believe was that of the tall man who wears the badge."

"You didn't hear another voice—one with an educated ring, but with a tendency to cut off the ends of words?"

Suddenly she smiled. "You mean Mr. Barlow, don't you? No, he wasn't with the crowd."

"Then you know Barlow?"

"Quite well. He has been very kind to us. I'm almost ready to revise my opinion of cattlemen after meeting him —and you."

Terry stood up suddenly. "I better be going," he said. "Our boys will be driving in here any minute now and they'll need me at the loading pens. Sure there's nothing I can do to help?"

She shook her head, following him out into the hall as he left with a brief farewell to her father. The bar was empty now and he went out to his pony without meeting anyone. He headed straight up Texas Street, his mind whirling with a strange confusion of ideas.

He found Tooker near the railroad loading pens. Terry told him his story, omitting only the part about the Leonards. Tooker nodded.

"It sounds like a mess," he said. "So far I reckon we've got them guessing. We'll be all right if they don't find out any facts until we get the beef loaded. Then I'm goin' to get the outfit on the back trail just as soon as possible." He motioned for Terry to ride with him. "We'll go out to meet the boys. It won't hurt to pass the word around so all the crew will know what's going on. It

wouldn't do to let them get their stories twisted. . . ."

Willie Andrews had circulated among the riders as they pushed the herd into town, passing word of what Donovan had learned in town and issuing orders about prompt loading. The whole crew worked earnestly until every steer was safely in a pen or a cattle car.

By this time there was a plume of smoke in the west, indicating the approach of an eastbound train. Soon the engineer whistled "Down brakes," and the train shuddered to a grinding halt.

"Going to pick up the cattle cars behind the three coaches," Tooker explained.

Willie pointed to another cloud of smoke in the east. " 'Nother one comin'. Must be due to pass each other here."

Tooker frowned. He felt sure no train was due from the east until evening when the regular cattle trains would pick up the day's shipments.

Terry Donovan did not even notice the passengers who were dropping down from the eastbound, his eyes watching the train roaring out of the east. This one stopped for water, but there were no passengers. Instead there were four stock cars loaded with cavalry horses, two sealed box cars and three coaches crammed with blue uniforms.

"Gov'ment must be gettin' ready to warm things up for the danged heathens," Willie commented. "Hancock made a botch of it last year and now Sherman's reservation scheme ain't workin' so good either. Mebbe we'll have a regular scrap and end it all up right."

"Maybe you're right," Terry agreed absently. "I hope so. There's enough trouble for settlers around here without the threat of Indian raids."

Willie stared at him in surprise but at that moment Tooker hailed them, motioning for them to follow him toward the stock pens.

They rounded the end of the train together but Terry dropped behind when he saw that Tooker wanted only Andrews. He cut across to a group of Bar O. Al Grinnel, in the crowd, greeted Terry with an elaborate smirk. He unbuckled his gun-belt with a flourish of fair play.

"Stick around, gents," he grated. "I'm goin' to learn a dirty whelp not to hit a man when he's too drunk to handle hisself."

THE troop train engine tooted shrilly and the train behind Donovan started. Soldiers were hooting from the car windows, adding to the confusion. Terry shook his head a little as Grinnel bore in with a yell. To a man who had just seen his first railroad it was a bit disconcerting to fight with a moving train almost on his heels. He was conscious of those clanking wheels even as he tried to meet Grinnel's savage attack. He had visions of being driven backward under the cars that made him freeze for an instant too long, and Grinnel struck with savagely flying fists. He was trying to hurl his enemy under the train wheels.

Fortunately his rush had to be careful, lest he overreach himself and fall a victim to his own strategy. That gave Terry his chance to recover.

He took a hard one on the side of his head and another in the short ribs, but both were glancing blows. He shook them off, avoided Grinnel's attempt to close in, and slipped toward more open ground. He caught a glimpse of yelling troopers on the rear platform, encouraging the combatants, then braced himself to meet another charge.

Grinnel started a roundhouse swing that would have felled a steer, but Donovan went under it and came up with a solid right that staggered the big man. He followed it promptly, nailing Grinnel with solid punches that brought the blood from nose and mouth.

The big fellow cursed. "I'll kill yuh fer that!" he snarled, and bored in savagely.

Grinnel was no boxer. Donovan met the assault with a swift counterattack, trading punches at close quarters. He took a heavy blow in the face but the fury of his onslaught drove Grinnel back.

The big man was fighting like a wounded buffalo now. He knew he had blown his best chance, that he was being cut to pieces by a man who could have no mercy after what had already happened. His only hope was to close in again.

They circled each other, then Al made his bid. Donovan seemed to bend over slightly and the howling watchers saw the finish of what must have been a blow. They saw Grinnel rush in. They saw Donovan spring to meet him. Then they saw Grinnel straighten up abrupt-

ly, teeter on his heels—and go over backward with a crash. Donovan had brought one up from his boot tops, a blow that had been too much even for Grinnel's iron jaw.

Terry rubbed his throat silently as he looked at his fallen enemy. A sudden silence in the group made him look up. Tooker had approached from the pens, his face troubled. With him were two other men—Major De Groodt and the burly cattle broker, Barlow.

"Fighting, eh?" De Groodt snapped. "Tooker, see to it that the principals are paid off and discharged immediately!"

Donovan could feel Barlow's eyes upon him, but Terry could not decide whether or not the man's interest was in a successful fighter. Tooker was protesting to De Groodt.

"Don't bother to stick up for me, Snowshoe," Terry said shortly. "I'm quitting anyway."

"I want to make sure that you get out of town with the rest of us," Tooker replied. "When Al wakes up and starts to shoot off his face there can't help but be some fireworks."

De Groodt seemed enraged. "You heard my orders, Tooker!" he commanded. "Have both of those men dropped from my pay roll at once!"

"Imagine bein' fired by sech a smart boss!" Andrews scoffed. "It's enough to drive a man to drink—which in my case it will."

"Fire that man also!" De Groodt shouted.

"Fire us all," Lynch invited. "You ain't done nothin' fer the outfit that we can see. Fire us all, then you can yell at Tooker because he ain't got a crew to do yore work."

The other riders muttered assent and De Groodt backed off in amazement. He made a faltering attempt to recover some of his dignity, then abruptly rode away. Barlow followed but Terry had not missed the way the cattle broker had looked at the unconscious Grinnel. And Terry thought he knew why.

Tooker had set up a sort of office in one of the Drovers rooms and he led the way there. Shortly De Groodt arrived with the payroll money. His only sign of interest was a curt reference to the battered Grinnel who had followed him in.

"Pay this man first and get rid of him," he ordered, and left the room.

SNOWSHOE TOOKER was glad enough to let him go. He had handled everything for so long that he was accustomed to his employer's laziness. He paid both Grinnel and McTague. When they had shuffled out he turned to the other hands who had stood around in silence.

"You boys know what you're up against," he said grimly. "There's some kind of a gang of thieves running this town and just now we've got 'em puzzled about what happened to a pair of their precious partners last night. They won't stay puzzled long. Al will blow the story. We've got to get out of town pronto!"

There was instant protest, but Donovan silenced the murmur firmly.

"He's right," he said shortly. "You'd all better hit the trail. I'm staying because I'm taking a hand in this fracas."

Tooker tried to hide his surprise. He turned abruptly to counting out money, and made no further reference to the town situation until he paid Donovan. Then he asked abruptly:

"What's your stake in this game, Terry?"

Donovan shook his head. "I don't know yet. I figure I've got to stop being a saddle bum right now if I ever expect to get anywhere. Maybe I'll try my hand at following a plow."

Tooker seemed skeptical but he did not press the inquiry. He handed Terry a slip of paper.

"Bill of sale for that roan you've been riding. You'll need a good bronc and it'll be part pay for the stock you saved us last night."

He waved the redhead's thanks away, then stuck out a hand. The two men shook hands quickly, then Donovan headed for the door.

Andrews overtook Terry on the sidewalk in front of the Drovers. "Ready to take on some chuck?" the straw boss asked. "A little food and a wash wouldnt' hurt yo' none."

Terry grinned. "Good eating house next to the Iron Trail." His voice dropped a little as he went on to the other men of the outfit. "Snowshoe wasn't exaggerating, boys. There's something plenty queer going on in this sweet-smelling village. That big gent Barlow who was with De Groodt may be a cattle broker but I'm certain he was with our friends on the prairie last

night. So was the deputy sheriff, a lanky jigger named Hapes."

"What's their game?" Lynch demanded.

"I don't know. That's why I'm advising you to play safe and take Tooker's advice."

The Bar O men walked down Texas Street. A dozen men stood in the shadow of the Iron Trail's wooden awning and among them Terry could distinguish the lean form of Morgan Hapes. There was a general tightening of lips as the Bar O outfit came abreast of them. Hands which had been swinging freely hung near guns. But no word came from the group.

Terry had a disconcerting thought that maybe this was preliminary to some concerted attack from the rear but before he could say anything an interruption destroyed the tension. Willie Andrews chose this moment to sing.

My heart's on the prairie where antelope browse.
My heart's on the prairie a-chasin' the cows.
A-chasin' the dogies and ropin' the steers
In town I do better at chasin' the dears.

On the hotel steps a man laughed. Willie's companions gave him an ironic cheer and they crossed to the restaurant. Andrews chuckled. "I reckon I stopped 'em that time, didn't I?"

The song helped to cover the fact that Donovan was directing the men to seats of strategic importance. Terry took a seat near a window where he could see the broad side of the hotel. A window toward the rear showed a light and he could see a man moving there. Judging by the man's height and general shape it was Hapes.

The man crossed the room as Terry watched, evidently going to the door. When he passed the window again two other men were with him.

Donovan grunted. "School's out, boys," he said in a low voice. "Hapes is up there with Al Grinnel and that Barlow jasper. By the time they finish pumping Al it won't be safe for Bar O men anywhere in this town."

Willie pushed back his chair. "I'll eat later," he said abruptly. "I oughta let Tooker know about this. You boys stick here and I'll make sure that the broncs are ready in case we have to run for it."

"Go out the back way," Terry advised grimly. "They'll have gunmen in all the alleys before you know it."

WILLIE went out through the kitchen. Donovan moved around among the men as they bolted their food.

"Tooker will be waiting at the Drovers," he told them. "Circle out the back way and avoid the street. If there's going to be a fight we want to be near the ponies. I'll bring up the rear."

There was still no alarm as the men paid for their meal and followed Willie's trail through the kitchen. When the others had disappeared Terry took the same course but instead of moving to the rear of the Iron Trail he remained in the shadow of the side awning. He slipped along until he was under the window through which he had seen Hapes, Grinnel and Barlow.

There was a murmur of voices from inside the room he had been watching but as he moved into a better position for listening the voices stopped. He heard a door open and then the sounds seemed to be transfered to another room. A woman's voice rang in angry protest, her words broken off abruptly by the sound of a blow. After that there was a flurry of struggling bodies—then the boom of a shot.

Donovan jumped back into the alley, trying to see into the room, but a shade blocked his view. A voice told the story, however. The oddly clipped tones of Barlow rang in quick anger.

"Curse you, Hapes!" the big man snapped. "Why did you have to shoot the old fool?"

"He heard us talkin'," Hapes snarled. "I had to do it!"

"Shut up! Get downstairs and stop any of those dumb plowboys from coming up here. Tell them that the old man was in pain and shot himself. Grinnel! Hold that girl."

Hot anger beat at Donovan's temples. He thought he had recognized Sue's voice in that first startled cry. Now he was sure of it. The dirty killers had done away with her father and no telling what they were proposing to do to her!

He snapped back to attention as Grinnel's voice rose in a snarl of pain. "Ow! My eyes! Stop her, somebody!"

A door slammed, Barlow cursed, and Grinnel kept on groaning. Above it all Terry could hear the patter of hurrying feet on a thin hall carpet. Then heavier feet took up the pursuit and Terry dashed for an alley door behind

the building.

He reached it and pulled it open just as the lighter footsteps sounded on bare stairs.

"This way, Sue!" he called. "Turn left and keep running!"

He could not know whether she recognized him or not but she followed directions. He had a brief glimpse of a white figure in the gloom as she passed him. Then he set himself to meet the burly man who was coming down the stairs.

A lamp in the lower hall reflected on a white shirt front and Terry knew the pursuer to be the cattle broker, Barlow. Then he caught the movement of a swift right hand which swept in under the flying coat-tails.

"What's up?" Terry asked, blocking the man's way.

Barlow snarled and swung the pistol barrel at Donovan's head. Terry ducked under the blow and came up with just such a punch as had felled Grinnel. Having no such iron jaw as Al Grinnel, Barlow crashed to the ground without uttering a sound.

Donovan stepped across him and picked up the gun which he had dropped. He could hear other hurrying footsteps in the hall above.

In spite of his grim anger Terry felt an odd sense of satisfaction as he sped back through the alley. The battle was on, opened with the brutal killing of a helpless old man. No longer would there be that indecision and sparring in the dark. The enemy had been identified and now was fair prey.

He could hear Sue Leonard's hurrying footsteps ahead of him but did not risk a hail until they were farther away from the Iron Trail. Then he called to her guardedly.

"It's Donovan!" he told her. "Keep moving and don't talk until we are out of earshot."

She obeyed, offering no comment until they had left the uproar completely behind. Then she said quickly, "I must find a law officer. They—they killed my father." He could sense the effort she was making to control herself.

"I know," he said, "but the law won't help us now. We've got to get clear before they pick up our trail. How did it happen?"

He kept a firm grip on her arm, steering her across the town in a more westerly direction. For a moment he thought she would not be able to reply but she caught her breath and spoke with surprising firmness.

"I think the change of room was responsible. We heard some men come into the room next to ours and it was possible to understand every word they said. Two of them were explaining a cattle rustling scheme to a third man who seemed to be a new recruit. We tried to keep quiet so they would not know that they were being overheard, then father started to cough. He was too weak to control it and they must have realized what had happened."

Donovan tried to spare her the anguish of telling the whole story.

"I heard the rest from outside," he said quietly. "Grinnel was the recruit, and the other two are the big guns in this sorry mess which has been deliberately planned to look like a war between cattlemen and farmers. I suppose you know who it was shot your father?"

He could feel her shudder. "Hapes. The—the lawman, or at least the man who poses as a deputy sheriff. Now I must find a real officer who will take care of justice."

"That's why you must keep on running," Terry told her grimly. "There's no law in this town except Hapes. I suppose you heard Barlow tell him to hurry downstairs and fix up a story about the shooting? You know what that means."

"Then what can I do?"

"You can't do anything just now except save yourself. Now that they have added cold-blooded killing to their other crimes they won't stop at anything. You represent a danger to them and they'll try to get rid of you—just as they got rid of your father."

She did not argue. She had roused herself to discuss their predicament but now she seemed to falter before the hopelessness of it all. Then trees loomed before them and Terry pressed her arm warningly as a light glowed through the trees.

V

A WOMAN'S voice challanged sharply and Terry strained his eyes to see her in the darkness. He could make out the bulk of a wagon, a lantern showing faintly through the canvas top. Then

he remembered the settlers' wagons he had noticed when he had ridden into town and the thought gave him hope. These folks wouldn't have any connections with the local gang.

He squeezed Sue's arm warningly and called:

"Don't shoot, ma'am. We mean no harm."

"Then keep a-movin'! I ain't wantin' no truck with sech critters as live in this sink-hole of iniquity. Sodom and Gomorrah was full of angels alongside of the thieves, cutthroats and idolaters what inhabit this outpost of perdition. I wouldn't want my dead body found in a place like this!"

"Me neither," Terry retorted. "That's exactly why we need some help. There's a couple of us here that will likely be dead bodies if some of the ungodly get their hands on us."

"What kind of help do you want?" the woman demanded.

SHE took it upon herself to reply. She stepped forward.

"I'm Susan Leonard," she said softly. "This gentleman has been helping me but I'm afraid there is little he can do now."

"A gal, hey?" the woman exclaimed. "What in tunket are you doin' around here?"

"Trying to stay alive," Sue replied, still advancing.

Terry realized it was better for her to talk, but he stayed beside her as she told of the tragedy which had befallen her. The woman had lowered her gun, and there was a scraping noise as the weapon was shoved across the floor of the wagon.

"What kin I do to help, dearie?" the woman asked. "Abraham mentioned you and your daddy this afternoon so I know you ain't lyin'."

"Is Abraham your husband, ma'am?" Terry asked.

"Yep. But sometimes I'm ashamed to admit it. Tonight, for instance. We traveled all the way down from the upper Solomon because Abe wanted a new plow. Then when we get here I find the town is almost as bad as it was when we went through before. No plows. Nothin' but licker—and I bet Abe knew it all the time!"

"Then you're not just taking up land?" Terry persisted.

"Land sakes, no. We got a hundred acres in wheat out there."

Donovan thought swiftly. "Look, ma'am, can you take care of this young lady and see that nobody finds her? I'll go make a try at getting horses. If—that is, if I don't get back could you take her with you when you leave town?"

"Just a moment," Sue interrupted. "I'm not leaving this town like a miserable refugee! My father had a wagon and equipment. He had valuable securities under his mattress. I intend to get both before I leave—and see that he gets a decent burial."

Before Donovan could speak again there came the sound of hoofbeats at a distance. The older woman took quick command of the situation.

"Climb into that wagon, dearie," she ordered. "Dig in under them blankets and don't move. I'll get rid of the Philistines if I have to smite 'em cheek and jowl!"

Terry helped Sue into the wagon, then whispered quickly to his new ally:

"I'll duck out into the shadows under that clump of trees. If you have any trouble, I'll take a hand. Keep out of the light. We could see you easily when we came up."

He had barely time to conceal himself when the woman's sharp challange halted three riders. He heard them grumble, then the booming tones of Morgan Hapes came in forced geniality.

"Easy there, Mrs. Plyly," he soothed. "Don't git so careless with that shootin' iron. Some night yo'll make a mistake and shoot some of the boys when they're bringin' Abe home."

"Is Abe there now?" she demanded acidly.

"Nope. He's still fortifyin' hisself against the late summer drought. Right now we're lookin' for a killer and kidnaper. Seen anything of a man and a girl? Some feller shot an old man at the hotel, then run off with the old coot's daughter. Mebbe it's a kidnap job and mebbe the gal was in on it, just figurin' to git the old man outa the way. Trouble is we ain't sure o' the feller but believe he's a tall, red-headed young feller named Donovan."

Mrs. Plyly seemed uninterested. "Now ain't that jest like young folks!" she exclaimed. "Ain't got no more respect for their elders than that miserable Abe

has for me. I'll bet they planned to kill the old man for his money. It's always the ones with money what get killed."

HAPES and his men retreated hastily. She shouted a final angry opinion across the dark prairie, then stood silently watching as they faded into the night.

Donovan spoke quietly at her shoulder. "I hope you don't believe their story."

"And what if I do?" she demanded. "Would that be any reason for me to play the game of such hoodlums? Well —is it true?"

Sue was scrambling out of the wagon. "Of course it's not true!" she said sharply. "That man who did the talking is the killer of my father!"

"Easy," Donovan warned her. "Mrs. Plyly believes you. What we've got to figure out now is what we should do next. It sounds to me like Hapes never told his story that I heard them planning—about your father committing suicide. You must have broken loose before he had time to get downstairs. So they changed it to what Hapes just told here. I guess you see where it puts us."

"I'll go back and face them down!" Sue said defiantly. "There will be enough honest men in town to stand by me."

"You won't do anything of the kind," Terry told her quietly. "You stay under cover until this gang of crooks is broken up. If I'm not back by morning you'd better make plans which don't include me."

He drifted away into the darkness, heading grimly for the Iron Trail. . . .

It was a tense group which gathered around a lantern at the door of the Drovers stable. Tooker counted heads in the gloom, assuring himself that all of the Bar O men were on hand except Donovan, Grinnel and McTague. They heard the crunch of boot heels in the gravel and De Groodt's voice came querulously:

"Tooker! Are you there?"

"Right here, Major. What's wrong?"

"That's what I want to find out. Are you hiding that man Donovan I ordered you to fire?"

Willie Andrews snorted belligerently but Tooker restrained him with a warning hand.

"I am not," he said steadily. "I haven't seen Donovan since he and Grinnel were paid off."

Hapes' voice boomed angrily in the darkness. "I'll search the stable, Major. I can't have a killer's friend interferin' with justice."

"Who killed who?" Tooker asked grimly.

"As if you didn't know!" Hapes sneered. "I want that Donovan jigger fer two crimes now. He shot a couple of farmers last night and now he's killed another man at the hotel. The old feller's daughter either run away with him or Donovan stole her—I don't know which."

Once more Willie had to be restrained by Tooker.

"Let him search," Snowshoe whispered. "Sounds like a lot more happened than we thought. I got a notion the kid has run some kind of a sandy on 'em and they're after him with a killer charge. The longer we let 'em fool around here the longer he'll have to make a getaway."

Raising his voice he broke in on De Groodt's flustered stammering.

"You're welcome to go through the place, Deputy," he said calmly. "Donovan ain't on our pay roll any longer, so it's not likely that he'll come back here."

"That's right!" De Groodt snapped. "Why are you here, Tooker? I thought you were going to hit the trail early."

Hapes waited menacingly. There were angry murmurs from the Bar O men but Tooker silenced them with a glance. "We're just leaving," he said. "Any orders?"

"No. Just get going before we have trouble with the town people."

"Fair enough. Get your traps together, boys."

Hapes and his men were already searching the stable. Herding the Bar O riders toward the door Tooker explained:

"We've got to go through with it to cover up. Andrews and Lynch slipped away minutes ago. I don't know what they're doing any more than I know what kind of a game Donovan is playing, but we'll make a lot of noise and maybe give them a chance."

"You mean we'll only fake leavin'?" a voice asked eagerly.

Tooker's quiet tones were firm. "No. We leave for Texas. My business don't

include sticking around for any useless wars. We'll do what we can to give the boys a chance, but that's as far as it goes. . . ."

MEANWHILE, Terry approached the Iron Trail from the rear, advancing with caution along the line he had taken in retreat. He approached the stable, wary of a trap, even though he felt certain his enemies would not be expecting him here. Once he took cover behind a stack of empty packing cases as sounds came from an easterly direction. He could hear a body of men riding out, then nearer he could make out the blurred forms of two horsemen, heard their voices.

"We'll git him yet," Morgan Hapes' voice rumbled angrily. "Nick can foller them cowpunchers outa town and make sure he don't join up with 'em. After they're gone we'll know we got him trapped. He didn't git far with a gal and no hosses."

Terry remained motionless as the two men rode past him. "Easy, Morg," the deputy's companion cautioned. "Don't talk so loud."

Hapes cursed and the pair of them dismounted, tying their horses in the stable yard without unsaddling. Terry trailed along swiftly, using their progress as a shield for getting close to the Iron Trail.

They went in through the back door. Terry worked his way in the shadows of the alley until he could hear a buzz of talk from the barroom. The place was still thronged with angry nesters but there was none of the loud conversation which might have been expected. Terry moved closer to a window and Barlow's words came to him clearly, apparently concluding some sort of harangue.

"I think you should know what I saw," he was saying. "The Leonard girl was not being taken away by force. She was going of her own free will. The whole thing was a conspiracy between the two of them to kill Leonard and steal his money. That is borne out by two bits of evidence which have come up within the past few minutes. We have a man who swears the Leonard girl knew Donovan and was pretty thick with him before he came here. And there are no valuables in Leonard's room. It looks like a carefully planned crime."

He paused significantly, and Terry could hear angry murmurs rising again.

"We oughta lynch the pair of 'em!" a man shouted.

Terry could see that the speaker was the squirrel-toothed man who had been with Hapes in the afternoon. Apparently Barlow was a good stage manager as well as an accomplished orator. He had left nothing to chance in his program to arouse the nesters to violent action.

Voices echoed the suggestion from all parts of the room but Barlow banged on a table, calling for order. Terry slipped away quietly, his mind active with this new slant. He tried the rear door cautiously, found it unlocked, and slipped inside. Voices came from a little distance and he stopped with his back against the door. Two men were arguing, apparently in a first floor room somewhere near at hand. One of them was Hapes and the other seemed to be Gillespie. The fat saloonman was protesting at the way his evening's business had been ruined.

Terry smiled grimly and started to climb those bare stairs. This would be as good a time as any to have a look for those papers of old Leonard's.

He found the door of the Leonards' room and tried the knob. It opened easily and he stepped in with his gun drawn. The room was empty. A smear of blood was in the middle of the bare floor but the body of Jackson Leonard had been removed. Not only that, but the room had been thoroughly ransacked.

Terry remained only long enough to make certain that there were no securities hidden under the mattress, then went back to the door. His hand was twisting the knob when there came the heavy tramp of feet on the back stairs.

The footsteps came closer, apparently approaching the very door at which he listened. Terry released his grasp on the doorknob, stepped back, ready for a showdown if the door should open. The men went by, however, and he could hear them entering the next room. The door slammed behind them.

He could hear them talking in whispers and he realized how clearly the Leonards must have overheard ordinary conversation. Then the whispers next door became mumbles, and Terry caught a serious tone. He could recognize the

bass voice of Morgan Hapes.

"Extra pay-off, boys," the lanky deputy was saying. "Barlow wants to be sure that we don't get tripped up with any of that Leonard paper in our hands. It would wreck our robbery yarn. Yo' boys split the cash and take the other papers plenty far out on the prairie and burn 'em. It ain't safe to leave 'em here in this chest."

DONOVAN moved swiftly but silently. In one movement he turned the doorknob, shoved the door open and stepped inside, his gun waving in a short arc.

"Hoist 'em!" he ordered grimly. "You've got me tagged as a killer already so it won't hurt my feelings any to earn the title."

The amazement of the men in the room was almost comic. Hapes backed up a step, his eyes fearful as he tried to get behind a pudgy little man with a dirty face. The third man, Al Grinnel, simply stood there with his jaw drooping. Terry took quick advantage of their stunned surprise.

"Put your hands flat against the wall —high over your heads," he ordered. "Now stay that way and don't tempt me. Just remember a man was killed here tonight—and that I know who killed him."

Keeping a sharp watch on the cursing trio he moved to where a massive chest stood against the other wall. Its lid was open and a heavy brass padlock lay on the floor beside it. A bundle of greenbacks was on the top inside the chest and below the money were papers which Terry judged to be the securities Sue had mentioned.

Stuffing the lot hastily into his shirt front he was buttoning the shirt when more footsteps sounded on the stairs. Two men were talking as they climbed —and one of them was Barlow. Terry could see the restless squirming of the men before him and he realized that they must expect Barlow to enter this room.

"Keep those elbows straight, Hapes!" he snapped in a low voice. "If those men come in here you'll be the first to stop a bullet. Just remember I know who killed old Leonard!"

"But I didn't—" Hapes began desperately.

"Shut up! You killed Leonard, and I know it. Of course you're not the brains of this outfit but you're the chief killer. I'll take you if I can't get Barlow."

The men in the hallway had stopped talking, and that seemed to mean something to Grinnel. At any rate he made his bid. Throwing himself sideward, he went for his gun, whirling to face Terry.

Donovan was just as prompt. He drove a hasty shot at Grinnel and jumped for the open window. Instantly the other two were in the fight, their weapons coming out even as they spun away from the wall—and Terry knew better than to stand and face such odds.

His first spring took him to the window but he emptied his gun as he went, firing twice at Hapes after throwing his first shots at Grinnel. Grunts of pain indicated that he had scored on both targets. Then he scrambled through the window, slid down the sloping wooden awning and leaped to the ground.

Donovan slipped along to the rear of the building, watching the window from which he had emerged. Above the shouted questions came a sound which brought a quick grin to his lips:

I wandered today to the still, Mag-gie
To sam-pul the moun-tin dew.
But the moonshine had flowed down the hill, Mag-gie
In a raid by the revenoo.

Warblin' Willie was just starting another verse about the awful waste of homespun spirit when Terry ran to meet him. Instantly the Andrews voice took on a tone of loud complaint.

"Lemme alone, yuh blasted polecat!" he howled. "Yo' and me is quits after the way yo' been a-doin'. Git away from me now!" He was already out of the saddle and handing the reins to Terry. "Let my bronc alone!" he yelled, then in a whisper: "Head through the alley and git outa town. I'll fool 'em as long as I kin. Hurry!"

Terry swung into saddle as Willie put on another loud show of outrage, firing into the air as Donovan put spurs to the pony and dashed away. By that time other guns were spitting angry lead from the upper windows of the hotel. But Terry knew that Willie would take care of himself.

Terry was clear of town before he realized that the pony under him was the roan Tooker had given him. The

saddle was his own also. Willie Andrews had deliberately planted himself back of the Iron Trail in anticipation of just such an emergency as had developed.

Terry swung sharply to the west as he approached the nearly dry bed of the Smoky Hill but the move was a ruse. He stopped to listen when he was on the south bank of the stream but could hear no sound of pursuit. Then he angled back toward the Chisholm, confident that he would be able to overtake the Bar O outfit without running afoul of any trailing nesters.

WHEN he struck the hard-packed ground which marked the cattle trail he let his pony out again, overtaking a party of horsemen within a matter of minutes.

A suspicious voice challenged sharply and Terry knew that the men ahead of him had halted warily.

"Howdy, Sam," he called. "Is that Abilene man still with you?"

"Nope. He turned back quite a spell ago. Who are you?"

"Donovan. I just wanted to make sure about that jasper."

Tooker's voice cut in then and there was a general chorus of questions as Terry rode up.

"What's goin' on?" Tooker demanded. "How many people have you assassinated tonight, and where's Lynch and Andrews?"

Donovan told the whole story, as quickly as its many angles would permit.

"Willie supplied me with a bronc for a getaway," he concluded. "I never did see Hank Lynch."

"He'll be along, I reckon," Tooker commented. "They didn't let me in on what they were planning to do but they're a pretty tough pair when it comes to looking out for themselves. What are you figuring to do next?"

"I'm going back to town as soon as the hooraw dies away."

The words were calm enough but there was a grimness in them which made Tooker confine his question to a mere:

"Why?"

"I can't do anything by hiding and dodging," Donovan said quietly. "I had to run away this time because I wanted to draw the hounds away from Sue Leonard's trail. The only answer to my problem is in Abilene—so I'm going back."

"What can you do there?"

"I don't exactly know. All I'm sure of is that I've got to break that Barlow hombre. He's the brains of this whole gang."

"Sorry we can't help," Tooker said simply. "You've got everybody against you."

"Not quite everybody." Terry chuckled. "There's an old woman on my side now. She's a tough gal . . . Well, so long. Give my thanks to Hank Lynch if I don't see him. I'll probably manage to meet Andrews if we both live long enough."

VI

DONOVAN rode on toward Abilene. The prairie was quiet. No sound came from any quarter, even when he knew he was abreast of the town.

It gave him a vague sense of uneasiness but he pushed on, trying to locate the spot where he had left Sue. But nowhere could he find the proper combination of trees, wagon and creek. Once the dark outline of the cottonwoods seemed familiar, but when he rode into the opening he could find no trace of camp or wagon.

He spent fully an hour covering the scant mile of creek where the wagon camp lay, most of the time walking with a hand ready to clamp over the roan's nostrils. Finally he stopped short when a level barrier appeared in his path. The railroad trestle! He had come too far. The Plyly wagon was somewhere back there in a southeasterly direction from the Iron Trail. He would have to retrace his steps and go through the whole nerve-wracking process again.

The search was a strain on his patience as well as on his skill. Finally he found himself back where he had felt a vague familiarity in the shadows. He walked toward the creek bank and ran his hands over the surface of the ground. Then he crossed swiftly to a tree and read the sign there with his fingertips. After that he knew. This was where the Plyly wagon had stood. Here was the tree under which he had waited while Mrs. Plyly talked to Hapes.

He had a flash of dread that the girl had been captured, but second thought reassured him. Those tracks into the

stream bed indicated a wagon moving out to the west. The Plylys had realized the need for flight.

The realization brought decision. The most important thing was the safety of Sue Leonard. He had to make certain that searchers were led away from her. Accordingly he swung his pony out from the shelter of the trees, heading away from the town and cutting across the stream where his trail would show plainly.

Dawn was burning away the eastern darkness when Terry crossed the Smoky Hill. He rode upstream along the bank of the shallow stream until he found the tracks of a rider who had crossed and headed south. With a little grunt of satisfaction he swung his pony and followed the unknown's trail, taking care to remain a few feet away from the other set of tracks. It was almost certain that someone would pick up his trail out of Abilene and he wanted his trailer to think he had been joined here by the girl. . . .

Willie Andrews was nobody's fool. On occasion he could show a certain boldness but he had a firm belief that heroes died young. Accordingly, Willie lay quiet in the dust until some of the nesters drifted along the alley in pursuit, then he began to complain loudly.

"He stole my bronc, the polecat did!" he wailed. "Then he fetched me a clout on top of the head and rode off. Somebody git after him and bring back my hoss!"

Two men brought ponies out of the stable yard in a hurry and rode away, leaving the other nesters to listen to Willie's bitter complaints.

No one seemed to doubt him. They took him back into the hotel with them and he became a part of the excited throng which went into indignant session. Half an hour later he met the first signs of doubt—from Al Grinnel.

The big cowhand, looking more battered than ever, came in from a back room where the doctor had been bandaging his ribs. He stared sourly at Andrews, his puffed and bloodshot eyes almost closed.

"So yuh helped the cussed polecat git away, did yuh?" he snarled. "Now mebbe yuh kin tell us where he was headed."

Morgan Hapes had come into the room behind Grinnel, his arm in a sling.

"Let him alone, Al," he snapped. "This man wasn't with Donovan. He was at the Drovers when I was there. Looks like he's just as much of a loser as we are." The deputy swung to face the settlers. "We'll hit the trail at daylight, boys," he said shortly. "Ain't no use tryin' to track a polecat in the dark."

WILLIE watched for an opportunity and slipped away from the hotel long enough to meet Hank Lynch and pass the word of what had happened. Then he hurried back to the Iron Trail and spent the rest of the night with the restless men in the barroom. But in the morning he slipped out of town, striking across Mud Creek, hoping to pick up the trail of the Leonard girl and find out if she was safe.

He rode all day without success and near sundown reached the spot where the railroad trestle spanned the Solomon like some enormous centipede. Even in the fading light he could see figures on the trestle, two blue-clad men who were running toward the eastern end. As he approached he saw that the troopers were Negro guards. One wore the chevrons of a corporal. He grinned amiably at Willie as the stooped rider swung in to meet them.

"Lucky yo'-all got out of the line of sun, mister," the corporal greeted. "We was gettin' all primed to try yo' with a rifle ball when we seen yo' wasn't one of them red rascals."

Willie grinned. "Shucks. I ain't lookin' that ornery, am I?"

"Couldn't tell for sure, boss. Powerful lot o' bad Injuns 'round here just now. Orders is to keep 'em away from the tracks."

"Had any orders about grub?" Willie hinted. "My stummick must think I'm mad at it."

The corporal laughed and pointed to where a thin trickle of smoke rose into the darkening western sky. "We got beans and salt meat back there. Yo're welcome to what you want. Jest wait till I change guards at this sentry box."

"Soljer, yo've got a visitor," Willie told him. "I'll get my bronc across this excuse fer a river while yo're doin' yore duty. I reckon he couldn't take kindly to walkin' across on the railroad ties."

He picked his way across the almost dry stream bed and waited for the

corporal to return with the sentry who was coming off duty. He could see other men down the track now and it struck him that this was a sizable group to be out in the open with no sign of camp equipment. It wasn't until he rode closer to the campfire that he noticed the low mound of sod which rose above the prairie.

"What kind of a contraption is that?" he asked. "It looks like yo' built yore soddie all cellar."

The corporal grinned with some pride. "That's a Underground Monitor, the invention of the colored folks. We had to have some kind of huts for this guard duty and that's what we worked out. I reckon we're goin' to need 'em right bad if this mean ole Injun trouble gets any worse."

It was the second time he had referred to growing Indian difficulties but Willie did not stop to ask questions now. Other soldiers were coming out to welcome their visitor and there were tantalizing smells coming from the cooking fire. Hunger was stronger than curiosity. Presently they were all doing justice to a substantial meal of army rations.

The soldiers felt certain that the whole mess would soon break out in open war. They were veterans of other Indian campaigns and they seemed to feel that the Army was tired of chasing war parties in the fall, only to have the Indians settle down at the first snowfall and act innocent. This time there would be a showdown.

They also had confidence in their Underground Monitor. They showed Willie its simple construction—merely a dugout with sod walls rising two feet above the prairie and a heavy sod roof resting on massive timbers. Men could stand erect inside and fire through loop-holes. Fireproof and bullet-proof, it would be a hard nut for mounted Indians to crack.

Willie found himself welcome. That suited him perfectly. Sooner or later he was sure Donovan would come this way.

He camped on the trail each night but still Donovan did not appear. On the third day, extra guards were dropped by the afternoon train, with word that the Indians had struck. The settlements on the upper Solomon had been attacked. Women had been captured, houses had been burned, and men had been ruthlessly butchered.

Orders were out for a campaign of revenge and there was talk of a scout troop from Fort Hays. Willie promptly mounted his horse and headed along the track. There was no longer any point in waiting here for Donovan. . . .

THE Underground Monitor at which Terry Donovan had stopped was just far enough to the west so that its guard detail did not make contact with the men who were hosts to Willie Andrews. An enormous black sergeant made him welcome and gave him a picture of the surrounding country. He even drew a rough map, showing Terry how the Solomon came down from the northwest to join the Smoky Hill.

"Then I'm too far west of the Solomon?" Terry asked.

"Too far for the fork. Yo' kin strike straight off to the no'th, though, and hit the Solomon right quick. It'll be a heap sho'ter than goin' back along the tracks."

For all his impatience Terry managed to get a night's rest. Then he forked his bronc and headed away from the railroad. Today's ride would be no loafing matter. The enemy had changed over night.

He rode hard throughout the morning and shortly before noon struck a wide, shallow stream which flowed in a general southeasterly direction. This would be the Solomon, and he crossed promptly, looking for trail signs.

A short distance back from the opposite bank he came upon a well-defined trail. Horses had made most of the marks but the freshest were the wheel tracks of a prairie schooner. That would be the Plyly wagon. They must have camped near here during the night.

He pushed on at a brisk canter, only to swing wide from the wagon trail as his alert eye noted some suspicious smudges along the river bank. Investigation confirmed his quick fears. Indians had camped here last night.

There was bleak dread in his eyes as he went back to the wagon trail. Another two miles dropped behind him, then as he topped a rise he saw a thin trickle of smoke drifting up from behind a prairie swell. Not much smoke —just what might rise from the ruins of a home.

Even as he realized the meaning of the smoke he saw that the wagon tracks

had veered sharply to the left. The Plylys had seen smoke also—or something even more threatening—and had hastily crossed the Solomon.

He followed the trail through the wet sands to the far side. He could see where a man and a woman had got out of the wagon to help the team haul it up the bank, then the trail indicated that the mules had been driven hard toward the cover of a tree-lined creek.

Terry sent the roan forward at a run, but halted as he approached the cottonwoods, something cold clamping his heart. Beneath the trees was the wagon, no moving creature near it. He moved in cautiously, alert against ambush. Then he saw that the wagon had been completely abandoned. He studied the ground carefully. Part of the story was clear. Six riders had come up, two riding unshod ponies while the other four had been mounted on animals which had been partly or entirely shod.

The trail led due west, six ponies and the mules. Terry followed it doggedly. Then the tracks entered a broad belt of roughened ground where the main war party had probably hidden. Trailing became hopeless in such a mess and the hunt had to be abandoned. The Plylys and Sue had disappeared, apparently into the midst of an Indian war party which might number several hundred.

Donovan moved swiftly after assuring himself that the trail of his friends was hopelessly lost in the welter of pony tracks. There was but one thing to do now. Riding back to the abandoned wagon he found a spade in the wagon box and quickly dug a shallow hole at the base of a cottonwood. He removed the bundle of papers and money from his blanket roll, making up a new bundle with an old horse blanket which had been left on the wagon seat. He buried the bundle, filled the hole carefully and obliterated all traces of digging. Then he headed back toward the broad trail of the war party. . . .

Meanwhile, Willie Andrews had reached Hays City, and had found the town in a state of angry excitement. He stopped only long enough for a meal, then rode on to the fort and promptly enrolled himself in the scout troop which was being formed. A stern-faced infantry lieutenant swore him in as a recruit for emergency service, and he was turned over to a brawny sergeant.

"Come on, cowboy." The sergeant grinned. "I'll show you where you'll sleep and where you'll stable your hoss. After that you're on your own. This outfit ain't goin' to do much drillin'. We'll just fight Injuns."

"Suits me," Willie said shortly.

ORDERS were already out for a march west to Fort Wallace, and Willie spent the balance of the afternoon in checking over the Goverment equipment which had been issued to him. His chief delight was the Spencer carbine which the Army had provided out of a special experimental lot. It was the first repeating carbine he had ever seen. There was something about the way he could pump cartridges through it which made him forget its lack of grace. With a weapon like this a man could give a pretty good account of himself.

After his first general glance at the other scouts in the command he paid little enough attention to faces. As a result it was with something of a jolt that when he was going in to mess he came face to face with a scrawny little gray-haired man. The little man simply stared at Willie.

"Great snakes!" Andrews exclaimed. "Abe Plyly! What in thunder are yo' doin' here?"

A frontiersman named Trudeau hastened to explain.

"Abe brung the news about the Solomon affair, Andrews," he said. "Him and four others was the only folks that got away."

Willie's lower jaw was still sagging. "What happened to Donovan?" he blurted.

Plyly studied him intently before replying. "I ain't seen him," he said finally. "Come along and we'll jaw this thing out a bit."

To Willie's disappointment Abe Plyly's story was merely the account of the Solomon raid. Plyly refused to admit that Sue Leonard had been one of the party and insisted that Terry Donovan had not appeared at all.

"We jest seen smoke and heard the shootin'," he declared. "So I turned the wagon and headed across country. Eli Morse and his wife rode up with some hosses they was tryin' to save and they persuaded me to cut loose from the wagon and ride with 'em. We done

that, follerin' the back trail of the red devils so no scoutin' parties could track us. We had a couple of close shaves but we got in with our hair. Now I'm goin' out to square accounts fer some folks I knew. That's all there is to it, and you needn't try to pump nothin' else outa me!"

Willie let it go at that. He felt certain that Sue had been one of the five survivors of the Solomon affair but that Plyly was keeping quiet about her for some reason. What bothered him was Terry's absence.

The scout troop went out at dawn the next morning, headed for Fort Wallace where they were to be joined by a few more men who had enlisted there. Only one bit of news reached them as they moved along. Lieutenant Colonel Benteen with a company of the Seventh Cavalry had come upon a force of Indians just as the savages deployed to attack a settlement on Spillman's Creek. The troops had made a hurried charge and the Indians had fled without resisting.

The scouts were hopeful that this would be their cue to take the trail but Major Forsyth, aide de camp to General Sheridan, ordered a continuation of the march to Fort Wallace. From the many reports coming in it seemed that the large force which had perpetrated the Saline and Solomon outrages was now splitting up into smaller raiding parties. There would be no point in chasing small bands when greater needs might be developing elsewhere.

They spent two days at Fort Wallace waiting for that need to appear and in that time Willie received a couple of jolts and made a few interesting discoveries. The jolts were in rather large form, being the bulky persons of Al Grinnel and Button McTague. The pair arrived by train with a dozen other recruits from the eastern part of the state. Neither had more than a passing greeting for Willie and he was just as well pleased.

On the evening of the second day at Wallace a messenger came in with information that a mule train encamped near Sheridan, the Kansas-Pacific terminus, had been attacked by Cheyennes.

First Sergeant McCall promptly appeared with orders.

"Get some sleep, boys. We're hitting the trail to Sheridan at midnight. That'll get us on the scene as soon as it's light enough to read sign. After that we may have a mighty long ride ahead."

Willie turned to Abe with a grin. "Mebbe this is it, feller," he said. "I got a powerful hankerin' to try this new carbine on some game I know. . . ."

THE night march to the rail head at Sheridan roused the scouts to a fine pitch of expectation, but they were not long in suffering a let-down. The raid had been considerably exaggerated, the affair having been the work of less than thirty Indians. Two men had been killed and a few mules had been driven off, but there was no indication that the attack was anything but an isolated plunder raid.

Sharp Grover, Chief of Scouts, Andrews and a scout named Stilwell rode out to read sign, and the officers took counsel among themselves after hearing the report. Grover brought the decision to the men.

"We're hittin' the trail," he said grimly. "This ain't the big show, but the Major figgers these varmints will lead us to the main party."

The advance was ordered and the troop went on again, the men spreading out across the prairie to pick up any side trails. This continued for four days, the troop gradually working toward the Republican River. On the fifth night out of Fort Wallace they camped on the bank of the Republican where a fresh trail marked the passage of about fifty warriors. This was still a small party in comparison to the force which had raided the Solomon and Saline settlements, but it was large enough to be worthy of attention.

The cooking fires had begun to blaze brightly against the darkening sky when there came a hail from downstream. A weary voice was calling to the sentry on that side of the camp.

"Don't shoot, partner! I'm coming in."

A man stumbled into the circle of firelight. His clothing was in shreds and his boots were broken and worn. Judging by the appearance of his breeches he must have spent a good portion of his time crawling on hands and knees. He looked around dazedly.

"What outfit's this?" he asked thickly.

It was then that Willie Andrews recognized the ragged man with the red whiskers.

"Donovan!" he exclaimed. "How in thunder did yo' git out here?"

Terry sat down heavily, apparently content now that he was among friends.

"Been hiding for a week in dry creek beds," he said slowly. "I ducked away from a Cheyenne war party."

VII

MAJOR FORSYTH and Sharp Grover had come across to investigate.

"What's all this?" the commander asked briskly. "Who's talking about a Cheyenne war party?"

Then came a move which left Willie with some deep thought. Abe Plyly spoke before Donovan could rally himself.

"This is Terry Donovan, Major," he said briskly. "He was figurin' to come to my place last week. I reckon the Injuns musta picked him up."

Donovan blinked at Plyly, then seemed to make an effort to pull his thoughts together.

"That's right, Major," he assented. "I found the settlement burned and a scout party picked me off. Lucky for me I happened to know one o' the warriors in the party so they decided to keep me for a pet. I stayed long enough to—uh—get sorta fed up with Injun cooking, then I ducked out during the night. I've been dodging scalping parties ever since."

Major Forsyth seemed disposed to accept the account.

"Where are the Indians?" he asked quickly.

Donovan shook his head. "I don't know where they're not," he replied. "The prairie seems full of war parties."

"But isn't there any general headquarters—any large group from which these war parties operate?"

"All I know is that the gang which raided the Solomon broke up right away. I was in camp with them for just one night, then they seemed to melt away in all directions. I had a hunch they were planning to meet again, maybe somewhere farther west."

Forsyth asked a few more questions about the numbers, tribes and equipment of the hostiles, then started to turn away.

"Better put that feller under guard, Major," Al Grinnel advised quickly. "He's wanted by the sheriff back in Abilene. Killed a man and robbed the hotel."

Both Plyly and Andrews stepped forward, but Terry waved them back, a warning in his eyes.

"I also tried to kill the man who's making that accusation, Major," Donovan said calmly. "He must still have the bandage on his ribs. The yarn he has told is pretty much lies, except that a crooked deputy sheriff does want to hang me for a killing he did himself."

Major Forsyth looked annoyed. "You men will have to settle such differences among yourselves," he said. "This is no court and unless there is a warrant out for this man I don't see that there is anything to be done about it. . . ."

The company moved out again at dawn, heading up the river. Shortly after a brief noontime halt the trail crossed the stream where there was a still larger trail. Many Indians had passed there not long ago and the command was halted for a consultation. Donovan was called in for questioning.

"Does this trail fit in with your ideas as to the location of the main Indian camp?" Major Forsyth asked abruptly.

"I think so. They seemed to be planning some sort of meeting out this way."

"What are they proposing to do?"

"I don't know. I can only guess that they are gathering for some sizable raid, probably on Sheridan or Fort Wallace itself."

"And you think the gathering place is close by?"

"It's possible. I wouldn't know any more about that than some of the rest of the men. In any case it looks like we have no business out here. This force is pretty small to buck up against the number of Indians that are around us."

Forsyth frowned and turned abruptly to Grover. "Do you agree with that?" he asked.

"I reckon not, Major," the Chief of Scouts drawled. "These redskins ain't showed no force yet. We better shove on. Ain't no use ridin' back to tell the cavalry there's Injuns out here. They know that already."

The order came for a continued advance and they moved on upstream, reaching the Arickaree fork of the Republican just before dusk.

The next day they followed the south bank of the Arickaree, and at about four o'clock in the afternoon worked through a bushy valley where the river wound crookedly, and came out into open country. On both sides the slope down to the river was gentle, giving an uninterrupted view of the prairie on all sides. It was an excellent camp site, since no surprise attack could develop against it but there was one disadvantage. Beyond the north bank of the dry stream bed there was a line of bluffs at a distance of something less than a mile, a natural barrier which shut off all view of the country beyond.

THEY went into camp even though the hour was early, taking advantage of the good grazing land as well as establishing themselves in a good strategic position. To Donovan's surprise no skirmishers were sent out to investigate the bluffs. He made no comment, but when he settled himself for the night it was with the uncomfortable feeling that many dark eyes were watching the scout camp from those ragged hills. . . .

A long time later he awoke in the blackness that precedes dawn. He had heard a dog barking out on the prairie where no dog should be. He poked Andrews in the back.

"Wake up, Willie!" he said sharply. "Roll out. I just heard a dog bark. There's Indians around."

Willie sat up grumbling. "Ferget it! Yo' heard a coyote."

Terry yanked the blankets away from him and turned to do the same for Plyly. "Get up!" he repeated more loudly. "I know what Indian curs sound like. This is it!"

Other men were stirring at the sound of his voice, and were impressed, for all their complaining. A scout went to arouse Grover and the Chief Scout came to Donovan immediately. He asked only a single brusque question, then began issuing sharp orders.

Within a few seconds the camp was astir, the men getting under arms with no sound louder than Al Grinnel's cursing.

They had time to take up positions of defense, then there was a hail from sentries and the roar of hoofs as yelling savages swept down on the camp. One force attacked in a frontal assault while a flanking force swept in to strike at the horse herd.

Anticipating the strategy by which the Cheyennes always tried to maroon their victims, scouts had run directly to the aid of the horse holders, and heavy firing broke out on both fronts as the defenders met the attack with a spirited vigor.

Terry threw himself into the battle at once, moving with other men to the defense of the horses. Having nothing but his six-gun, he had to wait for the fight to come to close quarters, but in the first few seconds of the firing he found himself just as busy as any of the others. He took one step to the side, avoiding the beating hoofs of an Indian pony, then shot the warrior cleanly from his saddle. Another savage came in from a different angle and the six-gun spoke again. It was hot work now, dust, powder smoke and the fresh tang of blood combining to set the horses into something like a panic.

Donovan threw another shot at a plunging figure, then he stepped back to avoid the flailing hoofs of a tethered pony. A pair of wiry hands clutched his ankles and he was thrown heavily. There was just time for him to realize that the Indian he had shot was making a last desperate attempt to count coup on a white man, then he was rolling swiftly to avoid a plunging knife.

He could hear the Indian's breath coming in agonized gasps, but the dying warrior was still deadly. He poked his gun into the Indian's throat, pulled the trigger and jerked himself clear. Then he scrambled to his feet in time to witness the bitter struggle which was taking place at the main camp.

The Indians had ridden right in among the scouts, but they had not reckoned with those new Spencer repeaters. The defenders were not caught helpless. Instead they poured in a withering fire which took a terrific toll of Indians. Suddenly, as if at an unspoken command, the attackers turned to run, their retreat instantly becoming a headlong flight.

Major Forsyth gave quick orders.

"Saddle up!" he shouted to the horse holders. "We'll run for it. You men in front keep up a brisk fire. Don't let those devils get positions in that long grass."

The last order was too late. The Indians, furious at their repulse, had al-

ready taken cover behind the clumps of tall buffalo grass, and now began to shower lead and arrows upon the camp.

"No use to run!" Terry yelled to Grover. "We're surrounded. How about getting to that island in the middle of the stream bed? Ask the Major if we can't move the broncs over before the Indians kill 'em all."

Major Forsyth's order came promptly. "Horses back to the island. Men in front cover the movement and fall back."

They worked feverishly, getting the animals across to the dry ground in the middle of the stream bed where a few stunted bushes would serve as hitching racks. Then the scouts began to fall back, fighting constantly as the triumphant savages advanced. When they reached the island, the skirmishing ceased, for the scouts were now out of range of the tall grass. Now the Indians would have to launch their attacks across open country.

A LULL did not last long enough for the scouts to prepare defenses, however. A fresh assault came almost as soon as the scouts drew out of range of the grass. Some five hundred warriors mounted for the charge while other braves covered their preparations by long-range firing from the nearest grass.

"Good tactics," Lieutenant Beecher commented calmly. "They must have a chief who knows what he's doing."

"Roman Nose," Terry told him, pointing to where a tall savage sat his pony in front of the mass. "He's the devil who led those attacks on the Saline and Solomon settlements."

Suddenly Major Forsyth uttered an exclamation of dismay.

Grover!" he called. "What happened to the supplies?"

The Chief Scout did not reply for a moment, and one of the other men answered for him. "The stuff was mostly back at the horse camp. I reckon the horse guards brung the grub over when they come."

There was an instant denial from the scouts who had been on duty with the horse herd. They had been having enough trouble with the horses and had not done anything about loading the supplies. The food and extra ammunition were still at the old camp.

Everybody blamed everybody else for a minute or so, then the Indians came on again in a furious charge.

Roman Nose rode in the forefront of the Indians, shouting promises to his warriors that the white men's bullets would turn to water. The men behind him rode low on their ponies' necks. Quickly they crossed the open ground to the stream bed, and then the Spencers began to spit their deadly messages of defiance. The front rank of warriors seemed to melt away under the leaden hail, only their leader, Roman Nose, remaining as though charmed by his own boasts.

Still the carbines poured in that continuous lethal fire, but the wave rolled on brokenly until Roman Nose and his foremost followers were almost on the island. Then the red commander went backward over his horse's rump as though driven by a battering ram. Amid the din Terry could hear Abe Plyly's triumphant yell.

"Took seven shots to do it, but I got 'im!"

That took the heart out of the wavering Indians. They turned and fled, this time in more of a panic than before. Donovan continued to fire until the Indians were out of range. Then he dropped his hot carbine beside the shallow burrow where he had lain and ran to the side of Major Forsyth. The officer had remained standing during the battle and had been hit twice by Indian fire just as the assault broke.

"It's all over, sir," he said quietly, as Forsyth protested against neglecting his command. "Let's get at these wounds so you'll be ready if they come back."

Two other scouts ran up to help, then Grover arrived with the information that both of the other officers were down. Lieutenant Beecher had been hard hit and Dr. Moers, the surgeon, was dying.

"Take command and dispose your men for the best possible defense," Forsyth told him grimly. "Tell Sergeant McCall to take charge of intrenchments. Shallow rifle pits will be best. How many others are hurt?"

"Not so many. We'll give 'em plenty yet if they want to make another try."

There was just time for the digging of crude intrenchments, then the prairie was once more alive with howling war-

riors. The charge was led by a chief named Red Feather.

It was fast, deadly work again and Terry Donovan was too busy firing to watch how the attack swept forward, wavered, and finally broke under the steady fire of the Spencers. All he knew was that he was pumping those heavy .56-caliber slugs into Cheyennes until the carbine burned his fingers. Then suddenly he realized that it was over. The Indians were retreating once more.

There was a ragged cheer from the scouts, but almost immediately there came a new development. Indian riflemen had taken positions among the clumps of buffalo grass and were beginning a steady long-range fire. However, they were not sniping at the scouts but at the horses. The men cursed helplessly as one pony after another went down before the terrific volume of fire. It took a lot of wild shooting, but eventually the last horse went down.

NOW the troop was bottled up by a vastly superior force and were without food or supplies. Ammunition was running low and there was no water worthy of the name. No relief could be expected. Of the original fifty men five were dead and sixteen were wounded, including both commissioned officers and the surgeon. What the Indians had failed to do by direct attack they might yet accomplish by waiting.

At dusk Grover disposed his pickets for the night and called several of the men together for a council with Major Forsyth. Terry was summoned along with Grinnel, Plyly, Trudeau and Stilwell. Grover put the matter bluntly.

"We're done fer, less'n we git help. Somebody's got to make a try at gettin' through to Fort Wallace. Who's willin' to make the try?"

Every man but Grinnel volunteered at once. Major Forsyth made the choice.

"We'll send Trudeau and Stilwell," he said shortly.

A few minutes later the two men slipped away in the darkness.

From the distant Indian camp came the wailing of squaws whose men had fallen, while from within the scouts' lines a wounded man babbled in delirium. No attack came, but the waiting was worse than the fighting. Lieutenant Beecher died just before midnight and two hours later Dr. Moers ceased to call for the water no man could give him. The weary scouts moved around restlessly, too tense for sleep.

Terry managed to get a short nap just before dawn, awakening to the sound of a sudden alarm. It was no real attack, however. A volley emptied two saddles and sent the rest of the band scurrying back.

Donovan found Willie's grim eyes upon him. "Yo' see what I mean, Terry?" the stooped cowpuncher asked.

"Scalps?"

"Yep. Two o' them devils had fresh scalps fastened to their lances. I reckon that means Stilwell and Dave didn't git through."

The scouts were a pretty glum lot as they prepared to endure another day. They had inflicted heavy damage upon the enemy, but still there was nothing encouraging in their situation. Indians still surrounded them. If Stillwell and Trudeau had been intercepted there would be no chance of getting help from the regulars.

Plyly was doing most of the surgeon's work now and Terry helped where he could. One of the worst casualties was Button McTague. Donovan tried to make the sufferer as comfortable as possible, remembering that McTague had been merely a victim of his own youth, not really a bad sort.

Dusk was just beginning to cool the island when Donovan came back from a tour of the other patients.

"Sip of water, Button?" he asked, trying to force a note of cheer into his voice. "Take a swallow and maybe you'll be able to sleep."

McTague's attempt at a smile was an effort. "No use," he whispered. "Save it—other boys." He reached out weakly and groped for Terry's arm. "Closer," he gasped. "Tell you something. Look out for Al—paper—Barlow. It's worth money. Don't let—"

The effort ended it for him. Button McTague had become just another name on the long list of frontier victims.

Terry frowned thoughtfully as he tried to puzzle out the halting message. Apparently McTague had been trying to warn him about the almost forgotten matter of those papers he had taken from Barlow's strong box. That all seemed so unimportant now.

The night brought no change, and still another day passed without an attack

on the island. The Indians patrolled just out of range.

That night Major Forsyth called a meeting of all able men except the sentinels. He was weakening fast under the drain of his own painful injuries.

"I'm afraid Trudeau and Stilwell were caught. We're done for unless we get help. Without horses we can't travel or transport the wounded. All of you who want to take the risk are free to make a break, if you desire."

Grover smiled as the men around him kept their silence. "I reckon we'll stick, Major. We can't leave the wounded here to be massacred."

"How about another try at gettin' help?" Plyly asked. "I'll give it a whirl. Jest as soon git skelped out there on the prairie as die on this dirty island!"

"I'm willing to give it a try, too," Donovan said. "Maybe I'd have a better chance of avoiding the Indians than some of the others would. How about it, Major? Do we go?"

"I don't see any other course." Major Forsyth was already too far gone to argue. "Have a try, but don't hesitate to come back if you find the Indian lines too tight."

GROVER took care of outfitting the two messengers. They left their carbines behind but each carried a .44 and a full belt of cartridges, a canteen of the alkaline water, and a couple of strips of cooked horse meat. And they were to cover over a hundred miles through country swarming with hostile Indians!

They crossed the stream bed quickly enough but then the progress became painfully slow. Indian pickets had to be avoided and it seemed as though campfires were everywhere. For the better part of an hour they wormed their way along flat on their stomachs, and after that covered what seemed like miles on hands and knees.

Morning found them out of sight of any Indian camps, a promising-looking line of cottonwoods just ahead. Both men were showing the effects of the night's journey, their knees bare and bleeding from crawling over sand and rock.

Donovan took a quick look at his companion. "We'll rest here a few minutes," he announced.

Abe swore, but gave in. His feet were giving out. They rested briefly, then went on doggedly, Abe dragging behind more and more as the afternoon went on.

The following day they made almost no progress. Both were stumbling from weariness and hunger. Shortly before noon they were caught in the open when a band of warriors came straight toward them, but once more they staved off disaster by the proverbial whisker. The corpse of a huge disemboweled buffalo lay on the prairie near them. Into this noisome shelter they jammed themselves, enduring its sickening hospitality until the savages had passed. Then they went on again.

VIII

SOME time later Donovan and Abe Plyly moved into the bed of another dry stream, swearing softly at the treacherous footing. Suddenly Abe went down with a gasp, his curses tinged with pain.

"Ankle," he said shortly in reply to Donovan's query. "I sprained her, I reckon." He tried to stand, but crumpled in a heap as he put his weight on the injured foot. Then he sat down calmly. "Keep goin'," he growled. "I'm done, but that's no reason fer you to quit. Them boys on the island need help."

Donovan stooped quickly and hoisted the old man to his shoulder.

"Don't be a fool!" Abe whispered harshly. "You can't get anywhere like this."

A half-dozen staggering steps proved the truth of that. Terry's knees were not equal to the strain and he pitched forward suddenly, the pair of them going down in a heap together.

Abe rolled clear. "Git outa here, cuss ye!" he snapped. "You can't let them other fellers down like this."

"Right," Terry said quietly. "I'm going. If it should happen that you come out alive and I don't, you'll find Sue's money and stuff under the tree I told you about."

Their hands met in the darkness, then Donovan scrambled to his feet and went up the sandy bank to the prairie. Abe could see his shadow against the stars for just an instant, then nothing but darkness.

Abe lay motionless after Donovan disappeared. With Donovan gone there was no chance of his reaching a settle-

ment. He would simply have to hole up somewhere and hope that a relief party would find him. Between starvation and Indians that hope was pretty slight.

An hour seemed like an eternity as he lay there in the darkness. He had about decided to start crawling along in search of cover when the soft thud of hoofbeats came to his ears. Blurred forms loomed against the stars and Abe cocked his .44 cautiously. The click must have been audible for a soft hail come immediately.

"Abe! Where are you?"

Plyly lowered his gun and let the air out of his lungs with an explosive grunt.

"Where did you find them hosses?" he demanded, for Donovan had ridden in beside him.

"Four Arapahoes had 'em," Terry said shortly. "They won't need 'em any more. We can have two horses each and change off once in a while."

One of the animals bore a cavalry saddle and Abe was quickly boosted up.

"Even some grub in the saddle bags," Terry said cheerfully. "Let's go."

By mid-morning they arrived at Fort Wallace, to find the place almost deserted. It sent a chill down Terry's spine to think of coming so far only to find no help available. The sentry at the gate reassured him.

"Plenty of help on the way," he said. "A pair of your men arrived on the Denver stage line and the driver brought 'em here danged near dead."

Terry stared. "You mean Trudeau and Stilwell? So they got through after all?"

"That sounds like the right names. They went out with Colonel Bankhead's relief column this mornin'."

There was more, but Donovan did not hear it until he had been taken to the barracks.

"Which way did the troops go?" he wanted to know then. "It seems funny we didn't meet 'em."

Lieutenant Johnson answered the question. "They went by way of Sheridan, keeping to the trail as much as possible because of the ambulances. Anyway your men did not seem too sure of finding the island and they wanted to follow the same trail the detachment made in reaching there in the first place."

Terry put down his coffee cup. "But that's fifty miles out of the way! Men can die while ambulances cover that much extra distance!"

The lieutenant tried to soothe him. "Maybe it won't be so bad. Colonel Carpenter is out on the Denver road with a troop of the Tenth. By this time he ought to have an order from Colonel Bankhead telling him to try to relieve your men."

"Without a guide?" Terry exclaimed. "By the time he works his way through all the dry washes there won't be anything left on the island but corpses! He's got to have a guide! I want to borrow the best horse in the fort."

"But you'd never make it, man! You're exhausted."

"Not quite. Get me a pony and I'll take my chances."

ABE was sleeping in complete exhaustion when Terry rode out. The cavalry horse he rode was fresh and plenty tough, putting the miles behind him effortlessly as his rider crouched low in the saddle. It was a race against time now, a race to get help to men who must be reaching the limits of their endurance.

A vast weariness was dragging at every muscle as he rode through the afternoon, sending sharp cramps into his legs and thighs in spite of his constant shifting of position. Three hours of rest in the middle of the night had to serve, then Donovan was in the saddle again, taking it easier now in order to save his horse for the later hours.

As the sun rose warm across his back he could feel himself growing a little giddy, and for minutes at a time he clung to the saddle with both hands, blindly depending on the horse to hold his direction. Then, shortly before midday, his bleared vision picked up a dust cloud ahead.

It might have been made by Indians, but he did not hesitate. Heading directly toward the dust he was soon able to make out the blue of uniforms in the haze. It was Carpenter's troop of Negro regulars, riding hard, but in a wrong direction.

He was already cutting across their trail to intercept them and within a few minutes was telling his story to Colonel Carpenter. There was a brief halt while the Colonel gave brisk orders and had Terry shifted to a fresh mount from the troop's remuda. Then the detachment

was in motion once more.

For the next couple of hours everything was a blank for Donovan. He still rode, a Negro trooper on each side of him, but he did not know that he was riding.

The afternoon was half spent when the crackle of carbines brought him back to alert attention. The advance guard was chasing the small force of Indians which had been left behind to watch the besieged men on the island. The savages were in full flight, while just beyond a rise Terry could see the island, and the gaunt scarecrows on it struggling erect to cheer their rescuers.

Down wind came the stench of putrefying flesh and Colonel Carpenter grimaced. "How have those poor devils been able to live in that?"

He gave quick orders and his men dashed for the island, wasting no time in helping the scouts to quit their foul refuge. The work went forward rapidly, rescuers and rescued alike eager to reach purer air. Most of the scouts were sick, but there had been no additional casualties.

Terry Donovan slid from the saddle and fell fast asleep on the ground. When he awoke it was daylight, and he knew that he had slept some sixteen hours or more. Soldiers and wagons were plentiful on the prairie now, Bankhead's force having come up with the ambulances and supplies. A camp had been set up so that the sick men could be cared for while details from the relief forces were searching the plain for sign of Indians. . . .

It was a slow journey back to Fort Wallace, the troops suiting their pace to the slow-rolling ambulances. Not until the men had been assigned to barracks did Terry find an opportunity for a private word with Abe. Then he brought up the subject which had been worrying him for days.

"Abe," he said, "we've got to move quick or we're going to let Sue Leonard in for more trouble. Grinnel hasn't been saying much but he certainly knows that Sue was with you when you came to Fort Hays. He'll tip off the gang at Abilene and Sue's life will be in danger."

Abe looked troubled. "I reckon you're right. How would it be if we told the whole yarn to Colonel Bankhead? Ask him to send the word to the commander at Fort Hays. Mebbe if the local law can't do anything with that crowd of rascals the Army will handle 'em."

Terry shook his head. "The Army won't undertake any town police work. Anyway they've got their hands full with this Indian war. What's more, I don't think it would save Sue."

"Why not?"

"Because she's too dangerous to Barlow and his crowd. She's the only real witness against them—and they know it. That market rustling outfit is big. They've been selling beef all along the line of the Kansas Pacific. They must have gang members in Hays City, and if we make a pass at Barlow it will be just too bad for Sue. They know we can't prove a thing against them without the only person who can offer direct evidence."

"How about you?" Willie cut in.

TERRY laughed mirthlessly.

"They've got a better story about me than I have about them."

"I mean mebbe yo've got somethin' on 'em that yo' don't know about. Didn't McTague give yo' a hint that way?"

"I suppose so—but we can't make any move until we see to it that Sue is out of their reach. Then I'll take a look at those papers I picked up. There's a chance that I grabbed something more than the Leonard papers, and maybe we'll have some other evidence. Anyway I'll have to play it my way. You fellows are still in the Army."

"Oh, no we ain't," Abe contradicted. "There's been all kinds o' new orders out in the last couple of days. Troops are on the march everywhere. Forsyth's scouts are goin' to be reorganized and only the ones who want to stay will go into the new outfit. Us old vets are done if we want to leave."

Terry nodded. "We'll give that ankle of yours another day of rest, then we'll ride over to Sheridan and catch the train to Hays. Once we get Sue to a safe place we'll open up on that Barlow crowd."

After breakfast next morning they learned the bad news. Grinnel had suddenly declared himself well and had ridden off to Sheridan with the mail sergeant.

Willie brought the news and he did not need Terry's look of dismay to realize what the move meant. Grinnel would

have the Abilene gang on the move one full day before protective action could be taken.

The three men spent a restless day at the fort, worried, and angry at their own carelessness. Finally the endless minutes dragged by and they hit the trail to Sheridan before daylight, to be ready to start east on the train. . . .

The eastbound arrived in Hays City shortly after noon the following day and Abe took charge of affairs. He knew the proprietor of a livery stable near the railroad station and he used the acquaintanceship for all it was worth. In twenty minutes he had picked up most of the gossip of the town and had hired three sturdy saddle horses. He, Terry and Willie Andrews wasted no time in hitting the trail out of town.

"Looks good," Abe commented when they were following an ill-defined trail across the rolling prairie. "From all accounts yore pals musta spent all last night tryin' to get a lead on Susie. Lucky I took pains to hide the women like I did."

Terry shook his head doubtfully. "You didn't see anything of Hapes or Grinnel in town, did you?" he countered. "Maybe they finally picked up a lead. How much of a place is this homestead where you left them?"

"Just a sod house for Eastlake and his old woman. Why?"

"Any reason for your friend to be having visitors?"

"Nope. How come you ask?"

Terry pointed to the trail. "Four riders went along here not long ago, maybe this morning. How far ahead is it?"

"Little over a mile, maybe."

A gun shot sounded clearly but faintly on the afternoon air. Donovan snapped an order even as he put spurs to his pony.

"You men watch ahead and on both sides. I'll keep an eye on the trail. Let's go!"

He saw what he expected to see as they climbed a gentle rise. Four riders had halted as though for a conference.

The trio took the rise at a dead run and as they reached high ground they could see other horsemen circling oddly on the prairie ahead. At first Terry did not spot the sod house which was so much a dugout that it scarcely showed above the ground. Then one of the horsemen fired a gun and there was an answering puff of smoke from the soddie.

Donovan pulled his gun, aware that Willie Andrews was yelling excitedly behind him and that Plyly had pulled a carbine from his boot. Then he bent low and sent his bronc flying down the slope, grimly savage as he recognized Grinnel and Hapes.

The unexpected appearance of the three oncoming riders seemed to disconcert the quartet of outlaws. They huddled quickly, and instantly twin puffs of smoke bloomed at the door of the sod house. One of the outlaws went sprawling from his saddle.

"Give it to 'em, Mom!" Abe yelled. "We're a-comin'!"

The other three outlaws did not wait. Hapes led the way in a headlong flight, not waiting to pick up the wounded man. Plyly started to pursue, but Donovan called him back.

"Not now!" he yelled. "We've got more important business."

ABE pulled up abruptly, then trotted on with the others to where the wounded enemy was making frantic signals of surrender. The fellow was a ratty sort of individual whose features were now marked by pain and fear. A slug had entered his right shoulder.

"Catch his bronc, Willie," Donovan ordered briskly. "We'll see how well this buckaroo can talk—if he wants to live a while longer."

Willie grinned at the prisoner's hasty protestations and rode on toward the runaway pony.

"Watch that feller, Abe!" he called back over his shoulder. "Terry won't be keepin' his mind on his business now." He gestured to where a man and three women had emerged from the sod house. One of the women was a stranger, another was the belligerent Mrs. Plyly—complete with carbine—and the third was Sue Leonard.

Terry grinned happily at sight of the girl but did not relax his vigilance. Tossing the reins to Abe he dropped to the ground and picked up the wounded man's fallen six-gun. Holding it ready, he hauled the fellow to his feet and nodded toward the sod house.

"Get moving!" he said briskly.

They covered the distance in silence, then Abe took over.

"I got him, Terry," he said, with a twisted grin. "You better git over there and tell Susie all about it."

Sue had been staring in perplexity, but she smiled at Abe's words. Whatever her doubts might have been about Donovan they seemed to have been dissipated.

"You do turn up in the most unexpected places, don't you?" she murmured as Terry went toward her.

He grinned. "Didn't I make it clear that I'd manage to get around to wherever you might be?"

She took his hand shyly. "You were a long while making it," she said, her voice low.

He hesitated a moment, then kissed her deliberately. "It seemed long enough to me—but I'll do better in the future."

In the next few minutes a number of points which interested both were cleared up. They were smiling at each other when Abe came out of the sod house to hail them.

"Better drop the hand-holdin' and come in here," he called. "Our new friend wants to tell us a few things. The polecat's sore because the other boys run off and left him."

They went in to where the rat-faced man lay on a wooden settee, his shoulder bandaged. The shifty eyes darted from one captor to another.

Abe glared at him. "All right, gallows bait, spill it quick!"

The man put on his best expression of injured innocence. "Honest, folks," he whined, "I didn't know what it was all about. Them fellers arrived in town yesterday and asked me and Pardee to help 'em hunt for a gal named Leonard. It wasn't till last night that we heard where she was and then this Hapes jasper claimed he had a warrant for her, and he swore us in as deputies. I didn't know there was anything wrong."

"What's your business?" Terry cut in.

"I sell beef to the Army post and to some of the stores in town."

"Hmm. One of Barlow's rustler crowd, eh?"

The man seemed surprised and perplexed. "Barlow?" he repeated slowly. "Don't know nobody by that handle. I just get dressed beef by wagon. It ain't none of my business where it comes from."

They took turns firing questions at him, but he was either an excellent actor or innocent of being in the beef selling graft. Finally Donovan was convinced. It would be like Barlow to cover his tracks even from members of his own gang.

"Keep an eye on him, Willie," he said briefly. "The rest of us will take a walk outside and talk things over."

Clear of the house he spoke briskly. "Time to decide," he said. "The Iron Trail people are still determined to get rid of Sue. We'll have to make our play before they can strike again."

"Suits me," Plyly growled. "The sooner I get back to the Solomon the better I'll be pleased. You kids come along, and if they try to foller us there we'll give 'em what-fer!"

"What condition is the place in since the raid?" Terry asked.

Eastlake knew. "Abe's friends went out with a squadron of troopers to salvage what they could and to bury the dead. They report that there's some grain still standin' and that Abe's place didn't burn."

"Know anything about my wagon?" Abe asked.

"Nope. Didn't hear 'em mention it."

DONOVAN gave Sue a quick glance of inquiry. At her nod he spoke with decision.

"We'll start right away. I guess we can do a couple of errands in Hays City tonight without attracting too much attention, then we'll ride all night."

"Good boy!" Plyly applauded. "I've got my mules and we'll buy a pair of horses in Hays. That'll give us some stock and we'll have a bit of grain to carry us over. By next year we'll be—"

"Back to the wilderness!" Mrs. Plyly groaned.

"Don't discourage us." Terry grinned. "I'm just getting properly infected with this hoeman's enthusiasm."

"You mean you're going to give up your cattle-herdin' to settle out there?"

"Why not?" he demanded seriously. "Some mighty good people died because they believed in that land. I'm just stubborn enough to want to make their plans work out, even if they can't be around to watch it. That's the reason I mentioned an errand in Hays tonight. I sorta figured that when Abe went to hunt horses Susie and I could go hunt a parson."

"Don't call me Susie," she said, trying

to sound severe. "And who said I'd marry you?"

"If you don't," he warned darkly, "I won't tell you where I buried your money."

"So?" she commented drily. "A new kind of villainy! I suppose I'm stuck, I can't afford to lose the money, so I'll have to take you. . . ."

When morning broke the little cavalcade was well clear of Hays City. The carefully planned activities in town had gone through without any trouble, even the hasty wedding ceremony attracting no attention. The Eastlakes had remained in town to help in the prosecution of the wounded prisoner, and it seemed certain that the authorities would take steps to break up the whole Abilene gang. Marshal Hickok had declared his intentions along that line and "Wild Bill" was just the man to get action.

The subsequent ride through the night had been a queer sort of wedding journey, but neither Terry nor Sue was in a mood to complain. After the weeks of suspense and doubt they were content to take this happier turn for what it was worth. The real battle with Barlow and his crowd was still to come. Action by the Hays authorities would certainly stir the rustler chief to action, but they would worry about it when the time came.

With the coming of daylight their spirits revived and Andrews opened up with a verse which must have been occupying his mind during the night ride.

My wife and I lived all alone,
In a little sod house we called our own.
We farm the land and raise some grain,
On holidays we'll raise some Cain.

Donovan laughed and the Plylys looked back with understanding smiles. But the mood did not last long. Crossing a rise they came upon a scene of desolation which reminded Terry of what he had seen when he had followed the Indian trail through the Solomon settlement. Blackened fields, the burned skeleton of a wagon, the charred remains of a sod house and two newly made graves indicated that the raiders had struck outlying farms as well as villages.

Mrs. Plyly uttered an exclamation of dismay. "Abraham, if our place looks like that I won't have the heart to touch a thing!"

"The sojers said we didn't get hurt much," Abe consoled her.

His optimism proved to be well-founded. Less than an hour of silent riding brought them to more blackened fields, but beyond a low ridge they found several acres of grain which remained golden and untouched. On the hillside beyond was a sod dugout which was fire-marked only on one corner. The raiders had evidently worked hastily and the fire had burned itself out without destroying the structure.

"See what I told you?" Abe exclaimed. "We'll be back into business in no time at all!"

IX

IN SPITE of weariness and the threat of further trouble, the five of them fell to work with enthusiasm. None took time for food until well past noon, and by that time astonishing progress had been made. The roof of the house was whole again, the door had been replaced, the stock was in the corral and the sod house cleaned. It remained only to repair the broken furniture.

"We'd better plan ahead now," Terry suggested quietly. "Barlow likely will move quickly when he hears of what happened at Hays. We can't let him catch us napping."

"Call yore shot, son," Abe said grimly. "We'll foller yore lead."

Terry assigned duties. Willie was to sleep the afternoon and take the first watch of the evening. Sue was to mount guard on the summit of the rise which separated the homestead from the ruined settlement. Abe and Terry were to take the mules and scout southward, combining their exploration with the duty of recovering the abandoned wagon. Mrs. Plyly would continue the work of preparing the house for a possible siege.

Donovan and Plyly set out as soon as the meal was over. Before long they swung sharply away from the stream, following the route which Terry had covered in trailing the Plyly wagon. They found the vehicle where it had been left.

Abe quickly set to work rigging a crude harness to replace the severed traces while Terry dug up the bundle he had buried. In only minutes they were ready to start back toward the

house. Then Terry made a discovery.

"Riders coming," he said shortly, pointing down the Solomon.

Plyly studied the distant smudge of dust. "Long ways off," he commented, "but it looks like just two of 'em to me . . . Giddap there, you long-eared sons o' guns!"

Only two men riding toward them openly must mean some sort of a trick. Donovan thought about it as they traveled back to the sod house, but got nowhere. They stopped at the crest of the rise where Sue stood guard and Terry motioned for her to climb into the wagon.

"Back to the house for you, soldier," he told her, giving her a hand up. "Someone is coming and you're just the party we can't aflord to have out in the open."

When they reached the house, he left Abe to help at the defenses while he went back to the ridge.

"Stay close," he warned, "and watch the other directions. This can mean anything."

Alert, but puzzled, Terry waited until the riders had crossed the flat land and were coming up the slope toward him. Then instead of retiring toward the sod house he held his ground, convinced that no attack was coming. The men had apparently ridden hard, both of them dusty and haggard, while their horses showed every sign of a punishing ride. One of the two riders was the hotel man, Gillespie.

"You're just the man we're looking for, Donovan," Gillespie said, his husky voice showing unmistakable signs of suppressed excitement. "There's some mighty nasty trouble headed your way. Maybe we can make some kind of a deal which will help both of us."

"Thanks. What's the deal?"

"It's about those papers you took from Barlow's strong box. I suppose you know what I mean?"

Donovan shook his head. "Sorry. I've never had a good look at them."

Relief and anxiety battled in the fat man's eyes. "But you still have them?" he asked quickly.

"Sure."

Gillespie's smile broke out again. "Then we can deal. Barlow had some documents which gave him a hold over me. He was ruining me. You took the papers when you picked up the ones they stole from the old man. Turn them over to me and you'll have two volunteers to help you fight the gang."

"Meaning that Barlow is on his way here?"

"Naturally. You've forced his hand. He has to get rid of the Leonard girl or his whole show is busted. How about it? Do we deal?"

Terry motioned toward the sod house. "Come along. We'll talk business with the rest of the outfit."

He led the way in silence to the hollow. Andrews and Plyly came out to meet them and the muzzle of a gun at the window indicated that the occupants of the house were equally alert.

"Visitors with a proposition for Sue," Terry said calmly. "Come on out and hear it, Susie." He kept his glance warily on the fat man as the girl came to the door. "Tell her, Gillespie," he said shortly. "They're her papers. What she says goes."

GILLESPIE nodded and slid from the saddle, tossing the reins to his companion. He repeated what he had already told Donovan, adding:

"All I'm asking for is a bundle of papers that have kept me in the clutches of a dirty blackmailer."

Sue smiled uncertainly. "It sounds reasonable," she said at length, "provided the papers do not have anything to do with Barlow or his gang. If they do we'll keep them as evidence. I don't propose to pass up anything which might help to convict the killers of my father!"

"Nothing like that there," Gillespie assured her.

She turned toward the house. "We'll see," she said shortly.

She was back almost immediately with the sandy bundle which Donovan had dumped just inside the door. She spread open the blanket wrapping and started to sort through the pile of papers. A package of currency and a sealed brown envelope were laid aside without anyone making a comment. The girl studied the next packet more carefully but Gillespie made no objection when she put that with the money.

As she reached for the large envelope which had been on the bottom, however, he snapped hastily:

"That's it. Turn that over to me and I'll be satisfied."

She studied him almost as carefully as she had scanned the papers. "It's yours," she said finally, "if I find that it has nothing to do with my own problem."

As she ran a slim finger under the flap of the envelope. Gillespie moved with surprising swiftness. The click of his gun hammer caught them all napping as he barked:

"Drop it! Don't any of you move or I'll shoot the girl!" The cocked gun held steady on Sue. "Hand me that envelope," the fat man ordered. "Steady now and no tricks!"

Sue shot a swift glance at Terry, then moved forward to place the packet in Gillespie's hand.

"Now walk past me toward the horses," he ordered. "You're going along as hostage to make certain your friends don't try any tricks."

He swung slowly as she passed, deliberately ignoring the others as though certain no one would make a break while he held that gun on the girl.

"Get on my horse," he ordered her. "Don't get any notions that—"

He broke off abruptly, his howl of pain blending with the boom of a gun. Instantly Donovan was upon him, bearing him to the ground as Willie turned to cover the startled youth on the horse who had accompanied the hotel man.

The fight was over almost before Sue could wheel around to look. Terry was holding Gillespie helpless while Plyly sprang to pick up the fat man's gun.

"What happened?" Sue asked breathlessly. "When that gun went off I thought I was shot."

Mrs. Plyly found her voice for the first time since the opening of the action. "Lucky you wasn't," she said acidly. "Either that fool husband of yours is plumb careless of your life or else he's mighty cocky about his gun eye. He took a crazy gamble on shootin' the gun outa that sinful publican's hand!"

Terry chuckled drily as he jerked Gillespie erect.

"Just call me William Tell," he said modestly, "and don't ever think I wasn't scared silly about trying it!" He saw that Abe was ready to take over and that Willie was already putting a rope on Gillespie's companion. "Come along, Susie," he invited cheerfully but with a certain grimness. "Let's amble up the hill while the rest of the folks tuck the prisoners away for the night. We mustn't forget that there's more trouble on the way. . . ."

Darkness had fallen across the silent prairie when Willie Andrews came out to take over the first watch.

"Any sign of Barlow?" he asked.

"All clear," Terry replied. "Don't fall asleep. Even though we're not likely to get a night attack we can't afford to be surprised. Barlow won't plan on leaving any witnesses alive this time."

At the sod house Terry and Susan saw that the bound figures of Gillespie and the man who had ridden with him, and whose name was Zeke, lay along the rear wall. Terry grinned at the prisoners but received only snarls in return. After that he ignored them, trying to keep up the spirits of the others as they polished off a hasty meal.

WHEN their hunger had been satisfied Abe nodded toward the stack of blankets in a corner.

"Better git settled down right away." he advised. "I'll relieve Andrews at midnight and you kin take over some time before dawn."

Terry shook his head. "I don't think I'll rest well until I know why our fat friend was so confounded anxious to get hold of those papers. Curiousity comes first, then sleep."

The others watched intently as Sue picked up the packet in question and began to spread its contents on a hastily repaired table. The documents were chiefly deeds and land transfer records, dating back to the middle years of the Civil War. Presently Sue uttered a sort of gasp.

"Kentucky land deeds! I know about this! Maybe you didn't know that Father and I came from Kentucky after losing our home there. A crowd of swindlers worked out a scheme to get hold of land which had been condemned because of the owners going with the Confederacy. No land was safe. People were killed and others called traitors when there was no one left to deny the charge. My father was lucky enough to lose only his land."

Plyly frowned thoughtfully. "I heard some talk about that scheme. Didn't it wind up in a big scandal?"

She nodded. "It was exposed when the ringleaders began to expand into wholesale robbery. Some of the crooks

were punished but the leaders escaped."

Donovan reached out to pick up a yellowed handbill. It gave brief details of the swindle and described the missing men, offering a reward for their apprehension.

"Here's our answer!" he cried excitedly. "Look at this description of the man named Clemson! If that isn't Gillespie I'll eat him! And Barlow must be the jigger known as Obers. My guess is that Barlow held the papers and securities when the gang broke up. Gillespie wanted to play it safe and hide under a new name and in a new business, but Barlow found him and spoiled it all. He forced Gillespie to let him use his hotel as a headquarters for a rustler gang!"

Abe pulled a wry grin. "And all the time they was both foolin' a bunch of dumb but honest farmers into playin' the game with 'em. No wonder they went loco when you walked off with these papers."

"Tie 'em up again, Susie," Donovan said quietly. "If we manage to live through the next day or so we'll have plenty of evidence to put the record straight. . . ."

The next morning Donovan worked around the house, preparing it for a real defense. At noon Willie went out to relieve Mrs. Plyly while Terry herded the stock out of the corral and through the wheat field. Prudence demanded the concealment of the animals for the time being.

It was while Terry was hobbling the horses in the pasturage that he heard the bang of a gun.

He started back through the grain field at a dead run, slowing his pace only when he reached the summit of the ridge behind the sod house. No one was in sight in the little hollow where the house stood but on the crest of the ridge where he and Sue had stood guard were nine horsemen. He could distinguish the angular form of Morgan Hapes, the lumpy bulk of Al Grinnel and the powerful figure of Barlow. Most of the others seemed vaguely familiar, and obviously were the other members of the gang whose headquarters were in the Iron Trail.

Terry crouched low to cross the ridge and worked down toward the rear of the sod house, trying to get within six-gun range in case the outlaws should try an immediate assault.

They seemed to be conferring as though not sure of their course. Presently Hapes sent flankers out in four directions until men were spread all along the ridge. Then he and Barlow rode toward the house. When they were within a hundred yards they halted. Hapes rose in his stirrups.

"Plyly!" he shouted. "This is the Law. I'm callin' on you to surrender an outlaw named Donovan. He's wanted fer the killin' of a gent named Jackson Leonard. Send out Leonard's daughter, too. She was in it with him!"

Abe's voice had almost an eerie ring as he bawled a reply.

"Go to the devil! You ain't the Law and we know it!"

"Yuh got thirty seconds," Hapes shouted again. "Either yuh send out Donovan and the girl in that time or we'll smoke yuh out. First yore grain field, then the house."

"It's still the same answer," Plyly replied. "Go to the devil!"

IN SPITE of the seriousness of the moment Terry grinned at the way Abe was taking advantage of the situation to indulge in some cussing before his wife. Then he moved to meet the attack which already was shaping up. Two of the flankers from the right of Hapes and Barlow were closing in toward the wheat field and he crawled hastily to meet them, keeping himself concealed among the grain stalks.

No further sound came from the house as Barlow and Hapes went back up the slope. Barlow waved an arm toward the advancing flankers.

"Go ahead, boys! Burn 'em out."

Terry could not quite get into position before the men reached the wheat so he rose to one knee, drawing his .44 on the outlaw who was fumbling for matches. The other man yelled a warning but the boom of Terry's gun drowned the words. Instantly there came the rattle of other gunshots as the men on the ridge raked the grain field.

Donovan had a moment of grim satisfaction, then hot, stinging pain clutched at the calf of his leg. One of those wild slugs had taken effect. Somebody on the ridge must have a rifle.

He pulled up his pants leg and stared at the red hole. The bullet had missed the bone but it was certainly going to

make things tough for a man trying to cover an entire field! He pulled a bandanna tightly around the leg in an effort to stop the flow of blood, then started toward the house, crawling now for more than one reason.

He was just in time to see the beginning of a wild assault by eight of the raiders, the ninth man having lost all interest in the proceedings because of the bullet Donovan had put into him. The outlaws came down the slope at a gallop, firing as they came.

The lead riders were in the yard when the defense opened up with a volley. Two outlaws went sprawling from their saddles and another seemed to lose control of his horse as the wounded animal rose, screaming, and staggered off to the right. The man tried to get the pony clear but he had to jump instead, as the horse went down. He landed running and came headlong toward the wheat field.

Donovan rose to meet him, pitting the .44 against the outlaw's Henry carbine. Then powder smoke blotted the outlaw out and Terry lunged to one side, trying to make himself an elusive target as he dragged his wounded leg.

Clear of the gun smoke he saw that his shot had told, but had not been fatal. The outlaw was stumbling, but he was sighting his carbine again. There was a blend of explosions as Donovan fired from the ground. This time the man went down to stay.

Then Terry Donovan had a chance to see what was happening at the sod house—and it was not a comforting sight. Three of the attackers had died in the yard but the other four were now on the slope behind and above the house. It was a blind spot for those inside. The only wall on that side was the blank cut of the dugout. The attackers could fire down through that flimsy roof.

With the thought Terry was up and crawling again, this time headed into the open in an attempt to get possession of the dead outlaw's carbine. His emergence from the wheat field brought a quick yell from Barlow. Bullets crashed around him but he crawled on, fighting off the pain which was making him sick. It seemed hours before he flattened himself behind the dead man, one hand grasping the carbine while the other snatched cartridges from the fellow's belt loops.

A slug smashed into the dead man but Terry sighted carefully on the big ramrod of the outlaw gang. Hapes had a rifle, so he was the man Terry had to get first. It was difficult to make that front sight behave, particularly when the target was beginning to get blurred, but Terry set his teeth hard and held his breath as his finger tightened on the trigger.

The buck of the carbine against his shoulder seemed to drive away some of the fog and he could see the motley "army" which staged a sally from the sod house. Abe, Mrs. Plyly and Sue were coming around the side of the soddie, firing as they came, while shots from the far side indicated that Willie was doing a job there.

The move caught the raiders on the hillside by surprise. Donovan threw another hasty shot at them just as two men and a horse went down. That left only one man in the saddle—Barlow. The big man put spurs to his mount and thundered across the slope toward the grain field, riding low, and with his Colt blazing as he came. Plainly he intended to ride Terry down, so Donovan discarded the carbine and drew his .44 again. It would be handier at close quarters.

HE PULLED himself to one knee, ready to lunge in either direction. A slug battered at his short ribs, numbing his whole side but not halting the upward motion of his gun. There was a vicious stutter of explosions as the two men exchanged shots at close range, then Terry threw himself aside to avoid the trampling hoofs.

He was holding on to consciousness now by will power alone, fighting nausea as he rolled desperately for another shot. It was not necessary. Barlow was toppling from the saddle, dead before he hit the ground.

Having held out for so long, it was a little foolish for Terry to pass out at that point. But he did, and had a brief moment of feeling ashamed of himself but not for long. After that he knew nothing at all until he was conscious of being jolted around and having someone poke painfully at his side and leg. Each time the pain brought on the blackness before anything could become clear enough for him to focus it.

Finally, however, he opened his eyes

to find himself under a blackened roof. Abe Plyly's voice was rattling excitedly.

"—and it's a danged good thing we got this Gillespie jasper alive. With the reward money we'll be able to put in some grain that'll make them Eastern dirt grubbers pop their eyeballs!"

"Stop braggin'," his wife admonished.

Terry's head was clear now and he chuckled a little at the way the Plylys had become normal. At the sound Sue came to his side with a hasty admonition.

"Be quiet now. You've got nothing to laugh about."

"Don't be so modest," he retorted. "You're a plenty for any man to be happy over. Just wait till I have time to make you believe it."

Just out of sight Willie Andrews broke into song with a couple of lines he had sung before:

. . . We'll raise Old Ned, my wife and me,
We'll raise a darned big familee.

Terry grinned up at Sue. "See what I mean?" he murmured.

From the Annals of the Frontier

ROUGHING it during the gold rush days of late '49 and early '50 in California, newcomers to San Francisco found it more expedient to send their laundry to Hawaii than to local establishments. Though the round trip took eight weeks, this was at least three weeks less than local service would take, and the charge, including transportation, was about 50% less.

ANOTHER leading problem in those days was finding a place to sleep. By November, 1849, San Francisco's population had grown to almost 50,000, but there were only fourteen hotels and seven hundred public beds into which guests were crowded in threes, fours and fives in eight-hour and later in six-hour shifts. Where did the rest of the 50,000 sleep? In the streets, in lobbies, on boats and in warehouses.

NEWS of murders and holdups were no novelty during the railroading days of the early 90s. A vivid picture of this hectic period is given in the new Paramount Pictures Technicolor hit, WHISPERING SMITH, which stars Alan Ladd as a two-gun agent fighting the railroad marauders. This photoplay constitutes a classic of the West of interest to all western fans.

GOOD cats were scarce on early-day ranches and very much in demand. Pack rats and field mice were always apt to make sudden inroads on a man's supplies, not to mention squirrels, skunks and other hungry critters. And since many ranches had to lay in a whole season's staples, a raid by animals might well be a catastrophe. Therefore a cat was mighty important, and a ranch cook frequently sent the boys out to scour the country and find him one. A cat was always worth ten dollars, never more and never less—this was a fixed tradition.

EARLY in 1948 two pink catfish were pumped out of a deep well near San Antonio, Texas. Neither of the fish had eyes. The specimens are now mounted in the San Antonio museum. According to Dr. Carl L. Hubbs, fish expert, the two pisces are probably survivors of catfish which some centuries back were trapped in an underground water system. Through evolution based on their lack of sunlight, they lost both eyes and pigmentation.

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

He's just a wild bull to the cowboys at the rodeo, but the Brahman means a good deal more to cattleman and packer!

HOLY COW!

IN INDIA the Brahman cow is sacred and is never killed, even in times of famine, when Indians are starving by the hundreds of thousands. But, if you've eaten good old American beef twice, the chances are that you've eaten sacred cow, right here. For now, it is estimated by authorities in the cattle industry, fifty percent of all the cattle in the world have some Brahman blood in them.

The first recorded Brahmans were brought to this country before the Civil War, ninety-nine years ago. The records of them were lost during that struggle, but since then it has been different, and other Brahmans were shipped into Texas as early as 1885. They were mostly bulls, and were used for crossbreeding with native cattle.

Today, as the result of these importations, thousands of Brahmans and crossbreeds are being shipped all over the country, to all the Rocky Mountain area, Arizona, Nebraska, California and other cattle-raising states. One Texan alone shipped eighteen hundred head of registered Brahmans, and there have been single unit shipments of as many as three thousand head to California alone.

One livestock commission man bought up over sixty thousand head and had no trouble disposing of them. And these single large shipments represent only small percentages of all the Brahmans sold.

Brahmans Are Distinctive

Many people have only seen Brahmans, with their distinctive shoulder hump, suggestive of the American buffalo, in rodeos, but wild bull riding cannot account for their amazing increase in numbers here in recent years, nor can the novelty of their appearance.

The simple fact is, India's sacred cow makes a better meat animal than our own cow which was imported from Europe, and its hybrid offspring also carries some of its good qualities. It is just a more profitable breed than the native animal.

There is more than one reason for the Brahman being with us, and all the reasons add up to dollars and cents for the rancher, the packer, the butcher and the restaurant man.

The first reason has to do with the Brahman's durability. This breed of cow is older than the Pyramids of Egypt! It has been traced back five thousand years. And since it has never been slaughtered in India, it has had to survive famine and disease, and naturally only the hardiest survived during this long history. It can live on less food and water, and still remain healthy, than any other known cow.

Another value it has, and this is the reason for its first importation into Texas, is its immunity to the dreaded tick fever. It will be remembered that this disease of Texas cattle caused a lot of bloodshed and a lot of law passing in other states, and furnished a lot of material for Western stories in its day.

These Cows Withstand Heat

The Brahman cow is biologically different from the European cow in a couple of peculiar ways. It can sweat, and thus withstand the heat better than the European cow. It can twitch its skin at any point, and at the same time the skin exudes a peculiar fluid called zobum, which ticks don't go for. Thus it is not bothered with the disease-carrying insects.

From the standpoint of staying alive, the Brahman is better suited to the cattle-raising Southwest, because it can live in hot, droughty country, which is the habitat of these ticks, and still put on weight and remain healthy. This fact alone makes it possible to raise cattle on millions of acres that wouldn't support the native cow.

But the goal of any beef cow is the butcher's block, and here again the Brahman makes the native look puny; even the famous old shorthorn and the whiteface. A beef calf sired by a Brahman bull will weigh nearly a hundred pounds more than any other breed. In a herd of a hundred butcher calves, this is ten thousand pounds more steak on the hoof! At present prices, that would increase the value of the herd by more than two thousand dollars! This is a big difference, even to a man with a small herd.

Everyone Profits

The packer gets in on the improvement, for the meat of a cross-breed or pureblooded Brahman suffers less shrinkage in transit on the hoof, sells for more money, and will cut out more than twenty-five percent more meat! Four cows on the hoof, if they have Brahman blood, will give him more meat to sell than five ordinary cows! That is a big profit when you consider the thousands upon thousands of cattle butchered every day in the year.

The restaurant also profits, for it has been proved by extended tests that Brahman meat shrinks less in cooking, is highest in palatability, has better coloring, and—this should make gourmets demand the Indian Cow—has the highest intensity and desirability of aroma, and is the tenderest of all beef tasted.

And the Government is even testing crossing Brahmans with Jerseys for milk production. You'll soon be able to get a glass of Brahman milk with your Brahmanburger.

The holy cow has definitely become more than just a slang exclamation in America, and he is here to stay. In Texas alone there are about 45,000 registered animals and a quarter of a million commercial Brahmans, and it is estimated that for every one of these, there are hundreds of grade Brahmans and Brahman crosses. The number has run into the millions, and is multiplying rapidly. Think of it! Holy Cow!

When Jim Benton meets the girl who is meant for him, he knows it right away—but he finds a rival in a banjo-playing Romeo!

by L. ERNENWEIN

JIM BENTON was a dreamer, but he was a doer, too, when he put his mind to something. Like now, as he flanked and hog-tied a kicking calf and burned his JB Connected brand on its hip. The critter's lusty bawling and the smoke from the scorched hair combined to keep Jim from hearing Pardee Lane until the old man climbed the corral fence and called: "I got news, Jim—important news!"

Jim Benton disliked to be interrupted in the middle of a chore. He glanced up at Lane and said, "I'll be through here directly," and went on with his work, ear-marking the heifer calf with his knife and adding the v-shaped strip of hide to a tally pile.

Folks in Spanish Basin had called Jim Benton touched in the head for choosing his section so high on Rosary Ridge. "It's all up and down and yonderly," they had scoffed. "Only crop he'll grow is clingin' vines."

Most homesteaders settled on the bottomland around Junction where they could raise two or three different crops and run a few steers as a sideline. But Jim Benton was cow-ranch-raised and he never forgot what his old dad had told him the day he left Texas:

"The beef business ain't no fast or easy way to make money, son. But if yuh'll stick by a cow she'll pull yuh through, regardless."

So Jim Benton did most of his homesteading a-saddle and was content with one crop a year—a calf crop. He liked to sit on his front gallery of an evening and look at the far-off sprawl of Spanish Basin and imagine how it would be to own all the land he could see. A man could run a big bunch of cattle on that much range. He could ride all day and never get off his own ranch.

Jim's old gent had given him some advice about girls, also.

"They're a flighty, scatterheels bunch as a breed," he had said, "and yuh'll do well to pass 'em by till yuh meet the one that's meant for you. After that, by grab, there just ain't nothin' yuh can do about it."

Because bachelor camps were lonely places and a man got tolerable tired of his own cooking, most homesteaders had families started by the time they were twenty-five. But Jim Benton seldom so much as looked at a girl until Pardee Lane and his daughter took over Rosary Ridge. Then Jim began shaving off his whiskers three times a week.

HER name was Linda, and the moment he saw her Jim Benton knew he had met his mate.

"She's the one," he told himself. "The one that's meant for me!"

It made him feel good just to look at Linda. Good all over. She had wavy hair that was between sorrel and bay for color, and greenish gray eyes that made a man feel richer than seven hundred dollars when she smiled at him. She was built the way Jim Benton believed a woman should be—not too tall and not too short. She seemed a trifle on the slim side, like a filly that had been weaned too soon. But Jim discovered that there was a roundness and a kind of cushioning softness to her when she was in his arms.

Because the Triangle T barn and corrals were in a sorry state, Jim had offered to help Pardee Lane put the place in order. Lane accepted with pleasure, whereupon Jim did most of the work while the old man entertained him with tall tales of fabulous fortunes he had almost found while prospecting for gold.

"I came close the last time," Pardee had explained, "but my wife was ailin' and couldn't stand high altitude. After she died, God rest her weary soul, I saved up a grubstake for another try at locatin' the Lost Bandit Bonanza. But Lindy badgered me into buyin' this place instead."

Pardee was a free talker, his tongue being loose as the second cinch on a double-rigged saddle. Jim took a dislike to him that first day, and wondered how so scampish a galoot could be the father of such a sweet daughter. Linda, he guessed, took after her mother. She seldom spoke unless she had something to say.

Jim Benton had made his beef gather, had trailed his steers to Junction and completed the addition of a bedroom wing on his house before he proposed to Linda. There was a full moon that night, with a soft breeze propelling the windmill to a slow clanking. Jim asked her, real polite and preacher-serious, if she would marry him. When Linda whispered "Yes," Jim kissed her so long and hugged her so tight she could scarcely breathe.

He had wanted to set a date for the wedding right away, but Linda said that calf roundup time would be the soonest she could consider marrying him.

"Mother made me promise to stick with Dad until he settles down," Linda explained. "Dad almost died the last time he went prospecting, and I'm

afraid one more trip into the mountains might be fatal, for he has a bad heart."

That had been in November. Now it was April and calf roundup was about over.

Jim Benton turned the heifer calf loose, brushed corral dust from his shirt.

"Is the news good, or bad?" he inquired.

"Bad," Pardee Lane said ominously.

"So?" Jim prompted.

But the old man didn't say anything as they walked to the new gallery Jim had built across the front of his house. Pardee examined a settee made of cowhide on a hand-hewn frame.

"Looks like a seat for two, if they sat real close," he said slyly.

"Shouldn't wonder," Jim agreed.

He rolled a cigarette and waited for Pardee to tell him the important news, and guessed the old man was a trifle put out because he had been kept waiting. But if a man stopped work every time the old coot sashayed up to talk he would never get anything done.

"Is yore calf crop bigger'n last year?" Pardee inquired.

Jim nodded. "Looks like it'll be close to seventy-five per cent." Then he asked: "How's Linda comin' along with that dun colt she's tryin' to gentle?"

"Good," Pardee reported. "Too danged good, in fact. That's what I came to tell yuh about."

A puzzled frown creased Jim's lantern-jawed face. "Yuh said it was bad news," he reminded.

"It is—if yuh're still waitin' to wed Lindy," the old man explained. "She's hired a fancy-faced young drifter to train the dun colt."

"When did that happen?"

"Day before yesterday, and they're thicker'n fleas already."

"Him and the colt?" Jim asked.

"Nope, him and Lindy. Never seen the beat of it. His name is Tate Beauford and he looks like a romancer. Besides bein' a fair hand with hosses he's a banjo player from here to who hid the broom. Guess that's why Lindy cottoned to him so quick. She always was one to be pleasured by music."

JIM nodded, recalling how Linda had laughed and kept time with the fiddles at the hoedowns they had attended in Junction. She sure liked music. He looked at his rope-calloused fingers and wondered if he could learn to play a banjo. It would be nice, sitting here on the front gallery of an evening, with Linda singing "Sweet Alice Ben Bolt" while he played the tune on a banjo.

"How come this Beauford to stop by yore place?" Jim asked.

"Wanted to shoe his pack-hoss which was travelin' tenderfooted. Beauford wasn't lookin' for a job, but Lindy talked him into takin' one, regardless. Of course I ain't sayin' it's love at first sight betwixt 'em, Jim. But was I you, I'd ride down there tonight and talk Lindy into a marriage ceremony—smackdab."

Jim Benton frowned, and felt like telling Pardee the reason Linda had put off the wedding last fall.

"If you wasn't such a fiddle-footed old fool," he thought, "we would've been married five months ago."

But all he said, was, "I'll stop by to see Linda tonight."

"Come in time for supper," Pardee invited.

Jim nodded, knowing how tasty Linda's cooking was, and what good luck she always had with her chocolate cakes. Then he remembered that Tate Beauford would be there.

"Reckon yore kitchen'd be a mite crowded with four people," he said. "I'll eat to home."

It was full dark when Jim Benton rode down Rosary Ridge. A three-quarter moon rimmed the high wall of the War Bonnets and the night air was spring-sweet with the scent of growing things. But Jim didn't pay much heed to the moonlight or the fragrance. He kept his eyes on the faint flicker of the Triangle T's lamplit windows and tried to believe that Linda's father had been spinning another windy when he had said Linda and the young drifter were thick as fleas.

It wasn't seemly that a proud and proper girl like Linda would honeyfuss around with a stranger on such short acquaintance. Especially after she had fixed up fancy curtains for the bedroom windows in Jim's ranchhouse and all. Linda was real good at embroid'ry. She had made a table cloth with a lace border pretty as a black widow spider's web. And a month ago she had taken to darning his socks. A girl like that wouldn't flirt with the first saddle tramp who came along.

"Shucks no," Jim said aloud.

Banjo music came faintly to him as he jogged across the flats. By the time he was within hailing distance of the house he heard singing—Linda's contralto voice harmonizing with a man's. They were singing "Sweet Alice Ben Bolt," which was Jim Benton's favorite tune. Or it had been, up to now.

The sound of Linda's voice reminded Jim of another thing his old dad had told him:

"Don't git took in by some honeyfussin' female just because she talks sorghum-sweet and has a kiss-me look in her eyes. Them kind is like a Sunday shirt. They're nice to show off in town but they don't wear worth a dang."

Jim Benton was thinking about that when he rode into the Triangle T yard and saw Linda sitting on the veranda bench with Tate Beauford. They weren't singing now; they were talking. And because Jim's bay horse just lallygagged along they didn't hear him until he was almost to the veranda. Jim saw how close they sat—like he and Linda had been sitting the night she had promised to marry him, come calf roundup time.

"Hello, Jim!" Linda called, in the cheerful way that always made him feel seven foot tall.

When she introduced Tate Beauford the stranger smiled smooth and quick as a county candidate.

"I'm shore pleasured to meet yuh, Benton," he said.

"Likewise," Jim lied.

"Haven't I saw you before, somewheres?" Beauford asked. "Abilene, or Dodge City, or Ogalalla?"

"No," Jim said, and guessed that Beauford was taking this way to brag about the big towns where he had been. "I came here direct from Texas."

Beauford chuckled, and said to Linda, "That reminds me of what a stage actor said at the Bird Cage in Tombstone last week. He sure was comical."

"What did he say?" Linda asked.

"Why, he said the reason there was so many Texans in Arizona was because Texas is such a good state—to be from."

Linda laughed. "Those actors!" she said.

Beauford looked at Jim. "Don't you think that's comical?"

"Reckon so," Jim said, and wondered how in tunnet he could get Linda alone long enough to talk her into marrying him tomorrow. A man couldn't discuss a private thing like that in front of a total stranger.

"Did yuh know there's an actress in Kansas City named Linda Lane?" Beauford asked.

"Mercy no," Linda exclaimed. "Mother would've had conniptions if she'd known I was named after an actress."

THEN Pardee came to the front door and winked at Jim.

"Come in here a minute, Beauford," he called. "I want to show yuh a genuine derrotero that tells where the Lost Bandit Bonanza is located."

"Pardee is fixing it so's I can be alone with Linda," Jim thought.

But she spoiled her father's scheme. "Tate doesn't want to look at maps," she said. "He's going to play us a tune on his banjo."

Jim knew then that Pardee Lane hadn't been funning when he said Linda and Beauford were thick as fleas. She'd known this jigger for only three days, and she was calling him by his first name. It didn't seem reasonable for Linda to act so familiar with Tate Beauford.

You could tell he was a romancer just by looking at him. He had curly black hair and Fancy Dan sideburns that came halfway down his jaws, and a smart-alecky smile. But Linda seemed anxious to keep him out here on the

veranda. She picked up his banjo, holding it in both hands as if it were made of golden eggshells, and she was smiling sweet as sorghum when she handed the banjo to Beauford.

"What's yore favorite tune, Benton?" the drifter asked.

Jim didn't answer for a moment, so Linda said: "'Sweet Alice Ben Bolt'."

"No, not that one," Jim muttered.

"Why, Jim," Linda exclaimed. "I thought you liked that better than any song in the world."

"I used to," Jim admitted. "Guess I heard it once too often."

He looked at Linda, seeing how her eyelashes made shadows on her cheeks, and how the doorway lamplight put a copper shine on her hair. She was as pretty as a picture in a frame—so danged pretty it made a man want to look at her all the time.

"I've got to scheme out some way to get shut of Beauford!" he thought.

"How about 'Syrup In The Gourd'?" Beauford offered. "That's a top tune, when it's played right."

Jim wondered how hard you would have to hit a man to break his right arm.

"I don't cotton to banjo music, no matter how it's played," he said.

That seemed to astonish Tate Beauford. He gawked at Jim like a bug-eyed bronc seeing a yellow slicker for the first time.

"I never saw a growed man that didn't like good banjo music!" he exclaimed.

"Well, yuh're seein' one now," Jim told him.

"I ain't so shore," Beauford said, and put down the banjo.

Jim's knuckles itched. "There's a way yuh could find out for shore," he said.

Beauford nodded. He rolled up his sleeves, and cocked his fists.

"Yuh don't look like a growed man to me, Benton," he said.

Which was when Jim hit him.

It wasn't much of a lick, that first one, but the impact of his fists against Beauford's face made Jim as happy as a starved steer at a feed trough. It was like that time he'd got drunk enough to dance fancy without feeling bashful.

Tate Beauford's right hand darted to his flattened nose. He was looking at the blood on his fingers when Jim hit him hard in the stomach. Beauford grunted like a throwed bronc. He backed up and tromped on his banjo, smashing it to smithereens.

Jim heard Linda cry out, and caught a brief glimpse of Pardee Lane barging down the veranda steps. Then one of Beauford's fists smashed against the bridge of Jim's nose and all he saw was a burst of bright light that sparkled in tinted splendor. But he swung blindly, and connected, and heard Linda scream again.

When his eyes came into focus he saw Pardee Lane stagger backward into Beauford's arms and heard Linda cry accusingly:

"Shame on you Jim Benton—hitting an old man!"

That didn't make sense to Jim, until Linda and Beauford began helping Pardee up the veranda steps. Then it dawned on him that his blind swing had done the damage to Pardee.

"Good glory!" Jim blurted, and started toward the veranda, intending to help tote Pardee into the house.

But Linda demanded: "Don't you think you've caused enough trouble for one night?"

"Shouldn't wonder," Jim said.

He felt lower than a snake sign in a wheel rut as he rode toward Rosary Ridge. . . .

IT WAS 'way past midnight when Jim Benton went to sleep, but he got up at daylight as usual. He doused his head in the water bucket and was combing his hair in front of the mirror when he saw the bruised bridge of his nose between a brace of black eyes. The sight fascinated him. It scarcely seemed possible that one blow could cause so much change in a man's face.

"The smart-alecky son must've hit me harder than I thought," Jim decided.

He built a fire and made coffee and went back to the mirror for another

lingering appraisal of the purple puffs around his eyes.

"I look comical as a clown," he reflected, and couldn't help grinning.

It occurred to him that Tate Beauford's nose was probably swollen plenty this morning. Then he remembered the smashed banjo. Beauford wouldn't be serenading Linda tonight, Jim thought, and whistled a cheery tune as he grained his bay bronc.

There was still a little jag of cows with unbranded calves in the horse trap. Jim counted the calves as he walked toward the house—nine, including the club-footed heifer that Linda wanted kept for a milk cow.

When he went up the gallery steps he saw two riders leaving the Triangle T. He couldn't identify them at this distance, but he guessed at once who they were.

"Linda and the drifter," Jim muttered, knowing that Pardee Lane never rode this early in the morning.

Then he noticed the pack-horse.

There was only one reason why Beauford and Linda would be riding west with a pack-horse, Jim thought dazedly. They were leaving the country!

Jim watched until the horses were three indistinct dots against the far-off flats.

"They'll make Junction by noon—and get married!" he whispered.

It was a strange thing. Jim Benton had lived here alone for five years and had never felt lonely. But he did now. Low-down lonely. He looked at the home-made settee and remembered how Linda had praised it the first time she had sat on it. He remembered Linda measuring the bedroom windows for curtains, deciding how the bed and commode and mirror should be arranged.

Jim recalled now that he had been a trifle embarrassed, even though there had been no furniture in the bedroom that day. But not Linda. She had closed her eyes and smiled and said, "I can imagine just how lovely it will look with white curtains at the windows and a nice blue spread on the bed. It'll be elegant, Jim—it really will!"

When the coffee boiled over Jim hurried into the house and saved enough for a full cup. The spilled coffee reminded him of what his dad used to say: "Cuss a dog that barks in the daytime, or a man that dreams before sundown."

The hot coffee cured the cold feeling in Jim's stomach. But it didn't banish the loneliness. Nothing, he guessed, would ever cure that. For even though Linda hadn't lived here, she was part of this place. He thought about her as he corralled the nine calves that needed branding. Why, he wondered, had she gone so hog-wild over Tate Beauford?

JIM was still trying to puzzle it out when he flanked his fourth calf and heard a horse cross the yard behind him. That, he thought, would be Pardee Lane, come to tell him the bad news. Without taking time to turn around, Jim called crossly:

"I'm too danged busy for talk, so sashay back where yuh belong."

Then he saw Linda, and let go the calf.

"I thought it was yore dad!" he exclaimed.

"He's gone off prospecting with Tate Beauford," Linda announced angrily. "And it's all your fault."

Jim stared at her as she came into the corral. "How come it's my fault?" he demanded.

"Your pesky fighting last night. I had Tate Beauford talked into taking a steady job breaking our colts, so Dad wouldn't go traipsing off with him."

"Then that's the reason yuh was so nice to Beauford," Jim reasoned, thinking aloud. "On account of Pardee havin' a wayward streak in him."

"Of course," Linda said. "What other reason would I have?"

Jim pushed back his battered hat and scratched his head and grinned.

"Guess it was my imagination," he admitted. "My old dad always said I was somewhat of a dreamer."

But Jim Benton was a doer, too, when he put his mind to something. Like now, as he reached out and took Linda in his arms.

THE RETURN OF NEVADA JORDAN

(*Continued from page* 101)

as long as that killer crew were so closely bunched.

"You came through, Stillwell, and I ain't one to forget," Jordan said with feeling as he indicated the gun on the desk. "Watch those skunks out back, will yuh, while I make my next move. Your left hand is still good."

The banker rewrapped a whisky-soaked handkerchief around his bloody right hand, tying the knot with his teeth.

With a pain-wracked smile, he picked up the gun.

"Can do, Nevada," he said. "Play your ace!"

'Yuh'll never get out of here alive," Latimer taunted. "And yuh both can go plumb to perdition, because I ain't never goin' to call off them curly wolves of mine!"

"I got a better idea," Nevada said softly. "Reckon yore clothes would fit me, Latimer?"

"Yuh'll never make it under this lawman's badge," Latimer sneered.

"Me and you, we're just about the same size." Nevada observed. "Take off them duds, Latimer. You can wear mine. Keep yore gun on him, Greg, while we make the swap." He chuckled as he started to make the clothes switch.

A few minutes later the bank was in complete darkness. The front door opened and a man stumbled out as though somebody had shoved him. His hands worked jerkily at his mouth as he started running. Silhouetted in the moonlight, he made an excellent target for the guns that suddenly blazed crimson from across the street.

The fleeing man faltered in his stride. He hit the sidewalk, face down. From the buildings across the street and from the alley behind the bank came four gaunt men, the killer crew that had held Jordan and Stillwell prisoners in the bank. They gathered around the body on the ground.

"Where's Latimer?" one of them asked.

Another choked out, "This is Lati-

[*Turn page*]

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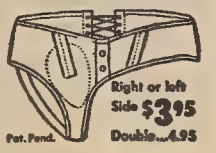

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mer! We bushwacked the boss! He's gagged and wearin' Nevada Jordan's clothes!"

A cold, mirthless laugh floated out of the shadows. The four gunslicks whipped around. There on the sidewalk stood Nevada Jordan, his twin .45s leveled.

"Shuck them guns and reach!"

Four guns thudded to the ground and eight hands reached for the sky. As if by magic, men came from the darkened doorways—peaceful, honest men. Greg Stillwell, his face streaked with blood, his right hand bandaged, came out of the shadows and stood beside Nevada Jordan. There was grim intent written on his face as he leveled the gun clutched in his left hand at the killer crew.

Nevada Jordan's eyes were frosty, his face grim as he spoke.

"Yore boss is dead and yore gun wages went with him. Yuh got yore choice of ridin' out or facin' the hangnoose. Which'll it be?"

Without speaking the gunnies went for their horses as townsmen closed in around Nevada Jordan and Greg Stillwell.

"Well, dad-burn my hide!" old Dan Camp exulted. "We've got a real man totin' that law badge now, boys. Let's hold a sidewalk election and make Nevada Jordan our new sheriff—and for keeps!"

A shout of approval went up from the crowd. Nevada Jordan looked down at the sheriff's badge pinned over his heart. A slow smile cracked his lips. He had ridden away an outlaw, returned to earn a lawman's job. Jim Jordan would have liked that.

"The crest and crowning of all good,
Life's final star, is Brotherhood."

—EDWIN MARKHAM.

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THE TRAIL BOSS

(*Continued from page* 10)

to happen to him when the jam converges on the narrow entrance to the gulch ain't going to be pretty. Being tromped to death and chawed to bits by pounding hoofs is the best he can hope for.

"Don't look," says Jim Hall riding next to me. "It's plumb sickening. Poor Railroad! And we're going to be short a hand the rest of the trip."

Then an astonishing thing happens. Railroad stands up a moment in his saddle just as the lead steers are crowding his horse. He weaves there uncertainly a moment, then he starts running back, stepping along on the massed backs of the stampeding animals with all the grace of a toe dancer, and twice the speed.

Safe as a Button

A couple of times he almost slips. But regaining his footing he prances on to the end of the herd, grabs the last steer's tail and slides to the ground, safe as a button in his mother's arms—except for a couple of bruises he gets when he hits the dirt.

Me and Jim Hall is the first to reach him.

"Where," I says as Railroad scrambles to his feet, "did you learn that circus trick?"

"That ain't no circus trick," snaps Railroad. "It's my business. If you had run the tops of as many rocking Santa Fe box cars as I have, you could do it too—with your big, blue, bleary eyes closed."

Then he adds, "I'd run back over them and get my horse, only I am afraid it's too late."

As it turns out Railroad had been forking a good cow horse with plenty of range savvy. Once freed of his rider he took out ahead of the stampede, gaining all the way. He beat them pounding steers to the head of the gulch and was in the clear all the way down.

Some of the boys found him next morning at the foot of the rocky draw, calm as you please and munching bunch grass. Only thing wrong his saddle was twisted sideways half off his back.

Of course the cattle were scattered bad and some were crippled when the stampede hit the bottleneck at the entrance to the gulch. One or two were killed outright.

The Railroad Torpedo

It might have been worse. Along about daylight we got the stampede shut off and

[*Turn page*]

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most of the steers calmed down and back on the bed ground. Jim Hall and me were riding along beside Railroad who had got himself another horse and was helping keep the spooked critters quiet.

"What I can't figure," I says, "was that explosion that tore things loose in the beginning."

"I can," puts in Railroad, looking kind of sheepish. "It was a railroad torpedo. One of those caps you set on the track to warn traffic there is a stalled train up ahead."

Then he adds, "I set it out when I got off my horse because I was having trouble with a loose saddle cinch. My partner's horse stepped on it when he come up behind me circling the herd. It worked fine, didn't it Mister Partridge?"

"It sure did," I says, not knowing whether to yank out my hogleg and blast him then and there, or wait till he told the boss. "But if I was you *Mister Ike McQuin,* I'd go back to the Santa Fe."

McQuin didn't though, Poker Face used to conclude. Fact is he become a top hand. Finally wound up with his own cow outfit, and done good with it. McQuin's brand was a pair of spread rails under a buglike looking thing he said was a railroad lantern. Most likely you've seen it—up in the Texas Panhandle somewheres. . . .

Poker Face Was Touchy

Personally I never have seen that particular brand. I doubt if anybody else has. But I would never say so to Poker Face Partridge. The old Texan was mighty touchy when anyone so much as hinted that his yarns lacked the authority of simon pure, unvarnished truth. At least he pretended to be.

Anyhow whether Railroad Ike McQuin was really fact or fiction, stampedes are always, as we pointed out at the start, serious and dramatic episodes in western cow country life. *"Stompedes,"* the oldtimers used to call them. Just as they spoke of a horse *"stomping"* his feet on the ground, rather than stamping them.

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Think it over. And I will be seeing you all again, come next TRIPLE WESTERN time.

—THE TRAIL BOSS

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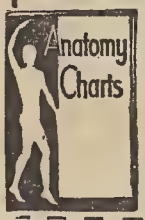

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"The Thundering Trail" by Norman A. Fox is a quick-trigger yarn that explodes into action with the murder of King Loring, owner of the Lazy-L ranch—a tragedy that revives the long dormant Loring-Rondeen feud and forces young Chan Loring to take the Lazy-L longhorns on a perilous trek along the Dodge City trail to new range in Montana.

Chan Loring returned to the Lazy-L, after a trip to Montana, to find that Caesar Rondeen had grievously wounded King Loring, Chan's father by adoption. While King Loring lay dying in his bed, Chan reported his success in filing on a tract of valuable grass land in Whispering Basin in Montana. He also told the elder Loring that he had gotten an Army beef contract from Fort Faraday on the Yellowstone River.

King Loring nodded happily, despite his pain, then told Chan how the Loring-Rondeen feud had started. Loring and three friends—Angus McQuade, a Scotchman, and the two Rondeen brothers, Slade and Caesar, had been Texas cowpunchers. They'd taken a pasear to Montana, had seen the Whispering Basin range and resolved some day to graze cows there.

Loring had married after that and then the Civil War intervened, and the men separated. After the war Slade Rondeen turned to rustling and it fell upon King Loring to have to kill his former friend. Then, when Caesar Rondeen showed up to even the score, Loring drove a bullet into a door frame and a splinter knocked out Caesar's left eye. From that day Caesar had hated Loring's insides.

As King Loring's voice grew weaker with approaching death, he made Chan take a vow to do three things for him. The first was to take the Lazy-L longhorns to Montana. The second was to find Caesar Rondeen, get a black metal box he owned and destroy the papers inside without looking at them. The third was to promise never to match gunsmoke with Rondeen!

Chan agreed, though he was puzzled by the last two requests. And then, just as King Loring died, Chan revealed that Angus McQuade—King's old friend—was already in Whispering Basin and had threatened to resist the onrush of any newcomers.

With King dead Chan made immediate plans for the drive to Montana. First, he rounded up Mitch Loring, his step-brother. Mitch was a gambler and wastrel and jealous of Chan, but he hurried back to the Lazy-L

when he learned King was dead.

As for Chan, he lingered in town to see Caesar Rondeen and to warn him to leave the Lazy-L alone. Rondeen laughed at him, told him he had friends all along the Dodge City trail and that the Lazy-L longhorns would never reach Montana. The feud was on—all the way to the hilt. And then Rondeen played his trump card. He filled in some of the unknown background in Chan's dim past and when he had finished Chan, stunned and amazed, knew why old King Loring had urged him never to go gunning for Rondeen!

Despite the setback he received in Rondeen's news, Chan Loring prepared for the hazardous trail drive. The herd was four thousand strong and the Dodge City trail was pitted with outlaws. But Chan meant to fulfill his vow to Loring even though it meant risking his life and the lives of his punchers. And from the very start the drive met trouble—first from Mitch Loring, who contested Chan's right to head the trek, and then from Rondeen and his renegade followers. It all adds up to a smashing tale of cattle and men and smoking Colts.

Our second hit novel is "Flying U Ranch," by B. M. Bower. It is another saga of that

[*Turn page*]

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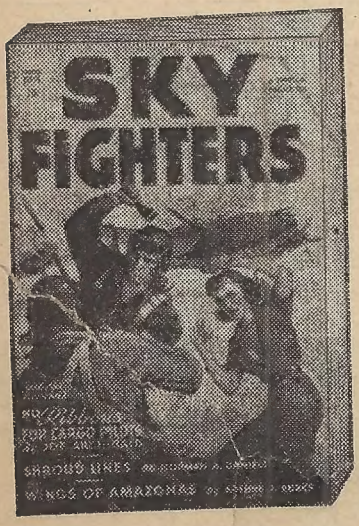

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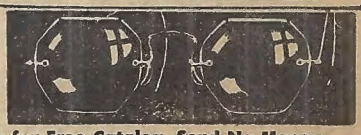

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famous rangeland ranch, the Flying U, and that distinguished crew of punchers known as The Happy Family. Certainly, there is no other ranch and no other aggregation of cowboys better known nor more widely loved than the Flying U and the Happy Family.

In "Flying U Ranch" there is a new addition to the outfit which includes Old Jim Whitmore, the owner; the Little Doctor, Andy Green, Pink, Big Medicine, Cal Emmett, Irish, Weary, Happy Jack and Chip Bennett. And the newcomer is Miguel Rapponi who soon became known as the Native Son. And he arrived just in time to join the Happy Family in defending the Flying U against an undercover scheme of rival sheepmen to exhaust the outfit's valuable grazing land.

It was after dinner one day that the Flyin U punchers first saw sheep crossing their range. There were two herders and four dogs with the woollies. Andy Green, Big Medicine, Weary and the others lost no time in driving the sheep back where they had come from.

Andy Green was finally detailed to follow the sheep to be sure they didn't return by another route. He took on the chore confidently, then ran into a trap. Before he knew what he was about the sheepmen had the upper hand and he was trussed up like a pig ready to be barbecued.

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While he lay helpless the sheep were started on their march back to the Flying U. When he got free and rejoined the outfit he touched off a grim siege that was to last for weeks as the sheep men tried every dodge—legal and otherwise—to grab Flying U range and the Flying U cowboys fought back the only way they knew how—with fists and guns.

The third great Western book slated for our next fiction roundup is "Desert Man," by Gladwell Richardson. This is a tense, gripping tale of treachery, storm and death that waited in the wilderness when Jim Gray hired out his six-guns and his wits to a group of Danite settlers and drove their emigrant train through a land over-run with gold-hungry outlaws.

Jim Gray, a man of the desert, who knew the Indians, the water holes and the good camping sites on the perilous Tanner trail, first encountered the Danite party when he rescued Jocelyn Duchet from a border ruffian named Kels Wydel.

The rescue made an enemy of Wydel who had many followers in the area. And it brought from the Danites an appeal to guide their emigrant train up the Tanner Trail. At first, Gray refused. But when he learned that Wydel was interested in the train and when he heard the rumor that the train was carrying a fortune in gold he decided to take on the job.

It proved to be a dangerous and thankless task. For even honest men can be lured to outlawry by the glitter of gold. And there were men in the Danite party who were willing to sell their souls for only a small portion of that fortune. So, battling treachery within the Danite ranks and the swarming outlaw hordes from the wilderness, Jim Gray made a wild and memorable dash to Fort Sunset along a trail marked by blood and sweat and hammering guns!

[*Turn page*]

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In addition to the three big novels in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN we will have in the old corral an interesting variety of short stories and fact features. So saddle up your old cayuse and gallop down to your local newsstand and reserve a copy of our next issue!

From Our Readers

THE first letter out of the mail bag this time is from Johnny Post of Kansas City, Missouri. Johnny writes as follows:

Dear Editor: "The Trail Horde" by Charles Alden Seltzer in your February issue was a real dyed-in-the-wool Western with plenty of slam-bang action. That's the way I like them. And I also want to say that "The Round-Up" by Mulford and "Lonesome River Range" by R. M. Hankins were mighty entertaining, too. TRIPLE WESTERN is a fine magazine. Only thing wrong with it is that it doesn't come out often enough.

Well, Johnny, we're glad you like TRIPLE WESTERN so much. Frankly, the amount of work that goes into preparing one issue makes it almost impossible for us to publish it more frequently. And don't forget we do a lot of shopping around, hunting for the best Westerns available. The best is none too good for TRIPLE WESTERN readers.

Ed Dempsey of Racine, Wisconsin, chimes in with a note about R. M. Hankins, who appeared for the first time in TRIPLE WESTERN in February.

Dear Editor: "Lonesome River Range" by R. M. Hankins was one of the most unusual Western stories I've ever come across. It was told in a different style and I thought it was mighty effective. There was all the drama and punch you expect in an ordinary Western, but with that was Hankins' distinctive treatment. For my money, it was one of the best yarns you've ever published and it sure has had plenty of competition because you print topnotch novels.

Yes, Ed, "Lonesome River Range" was quite a story. We've received many favorable comments on it. We weren't surprised at all. Hankins can write and he can hold your interest. As time goes on you'll be meeting other Western authors with stories equally as compelling, so keep on the TRIPLE WESTERN trail.

Thank you, one and all, for your kind letters. They are deeply appreciated. Whenever you have a spare moment drop a line to: The Editor, TRIPLE WESTERN, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. *Adios, amigos*—but just for a little while. —THE EDITOR

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